The Most Special Spiral Horn?

Nyala

The author and his huge first Lord Derby's eland bull measuring just a half inch below the magical 50 inch mark.

The author and Martin, son of the local Zande chief, elephant poacher and the best tracker the author has ever hunted with, stand next to the author's first bongo bull as mentioned in the story.

Photo courtesy of Francois Guillet - A mature mountain nyala bull in Bale Mountain National Park, Ethiopia.

A superb Menelik's bushbuck ram from Ethiopia. Often rated as the most beautiful of all the 11 bushbuck subspecies recognized by both Rowland Ward and SCI together, this ram would rank high in both record books.

Lesser kudu
Peter and his first plus 60 inch Southern greater kudu shot with Joe Wright in Zimbabwe.

Photo courtesy of Adam Parkison - A massive plus 50 inch Lord Derby's eland monarch photographed in the CAWA concession in eastern C.A.R.

I have often been asked, which do I think is the most special of all the spiral horns. Well, the first question to be asked is probably what constitutes a spiral horn and how many are there? Traditionally, the spiral horns or tragelaphine family constitute nine species: kudu, lesser kudu, eland, giant eland, nyala, mountain nyala, sitatunga, bushbuck and bongo, a total of nine animals. If all the species and subspecies recognized by both Rowland Ward and SCI are taken into account, however, this number expands to a total of 30 animals of which only four are no longer available on licence in
Africa. These are western giant eland, previously found in southeastern Senegal, southwestern Mali and northern Guinea, eastern bongo, formally found in the rain forests of Kenya, especially the Mau Range, Aberdares and Mount Kenya and, finally, two bushbuck subspecies recognized only by Rowland Ward and which are found in or about the Horn of Africa, namely, the Shoan and Somalian bushbucks, of which only a small handful have ever been entered into The Book and the last one many years ago.

Having hunted all the 26 sub-species and species available on licence, I can honestly say that every single one has an extremely special place in my heart. The hunting of these wonderfully clever and beautiful antelopes has guided my footsteps through the length and breadth of Africa for over half my life and, although I am not one of those lucky people who can say that, if they had their life over again, they would do everything exactly the same – I have made way too many mistakes to make such a statement – when it comes to the spiral horns, I would consider it an absolute privilege if I were given the opportunity and ability to hunt them all over again.

So, what criteria have I used to determine which is the most special of all these incredible animals? If beauty alone was the determining factor, I would probably have to choose the lesser kudu (which I once described as reminding me of a slender, elegant model walking down the catwalk of a top fashion show in Paris), or the common nyala which is anything but common especially if, like me, you have been looking for a plus 30 inch bull in a free range area without success every year for the last nine.

If shy, sly cunning was the determining factor, I would have to tip my hat in favour of western or forest sitatunga. I have hunted them in Cameroon, C.A.R., Gabon and the extreme north of Zambia (some four kilometres from the Congo border), on six occasions in total and shot a grand total of two and neither
particularly big. In fact, one was embarrassingly small and I came in for some well-directed criticism for shooting it. I had no excuse other than the fact that I became so hopelessly over excited by the sight of my first western or forest sitatunga bull after all the years of searching and there was so little time to take the shot that I barely gave the horns of the animal more than a fleeting glance after mishearing my outstanding, young, French professional hunter. We knew from the tracks that two western or forest sitatunga frequented the area around the long, narrow, two kilometer glade in the CAR rain forests but when he said, "Eet is not a big one. " I thought he said, "Eet is not ze big one. "

On four other occasions I returned home empty handed and the one I shot in the far north of Zambia is open to question. Was it a western or forest sitatunga or the more common Zambezi sitatunga? No-one can confirm this one way or the other as so little research has been conducted into these secretive animals which have the well documented ability to hide under water with only the tips of their noses showing. Certainly, watching the females and young over the years, I have never seen more cautious and nervous animals.

For sheer pugnacity and courage per pound, the Cape or South African bushbuck would win hands down. I have just completed editing and writing the book, Hunting the Spiral Horns – Bushbuck – The Little Big Buck, and must confess that my fellow contributors, who read like the Who’s Who of bushbuck hunters, have taught me so much about these feisty beasts. While I knew about their aggression towards dogs and their reputation for killing those who were either too eager or too inexperienced, I had no idea that so many of them had attacked and even killed people despite my own first bushbuck encounter along the Sand River in the South African Lowveld, which nearly cost me the sight in my left eye. After shooting the little buck from the top of the bank through thick reeds, the recovery operation was where things went awry. Plunging though
the river with my tracker at a rate of knots in the hope that the noise and hustle and bustle would scare away any lurking flat dogs, I slipped and fell on the exit from the water. As I did so, a river reed pierced my eye which immediately filled with blood and I could not see out of it. At the same time, the "dead" bushbuck lurched to its feet and charged the tracker in front of me drawing blood from his chest as the sharp daggers these buck wear on their heads raked across his bare skin. My friend back on top of the bank put an end to proceedings with my Musgrave 30-06 but, what had started as a triumphant exercise to recover my first bushbuck, ended in disarray. An eye operation back in Johannesburg saved the sight in my eye but it has never been the same and, even today, when I am tired my left eye becomes sore and red and, no, it's not because I have been looking too deep into that red wine bottle.

If it was purely a function of hunting difficulty, I would probably choose either the mountain nyala or Lord Derby’s eland. It took me two hunts and 33 hunting days before I found and saw a good representative mountain nyala bull in Ethiopia’s Munessa Forest. It was mature but not particularly big and I subsequently returned and found an excellent trophy but I can seldom remember feeling a sense of relief as strongly after the end of the hunt.

Both hunts required levels of fitness I had not previously experienced and I was so glad I had trained hard for them. In the months before leaving, I was running 48 kilometres a week, cycling a similar distance and gyming daily. Although the Munessa Forest was only 9,000 feet above sea level, it was very steep and you were either going up thigh burning 45 degree slopes or coming down similar knee straining ones.

I hunted Lord Derby’s eland on four occasions over 44 hunting days and returned with a grand total of two bulls, one a half an inch shy of the magical 50 inch limit for the massive super bulls and one just over the selfsame limit. I wrote at the
time that hunting these eland was much like hunting elephant. You hunted them with your feet.

If I had to choose one animal to hunt for the rest of my life, it would be Lord Derby’s eland in the Central African Republic. I grew to love the rolling hills and unpopulated, open, thorn free terrain of eastern CAR, which often reminded me of an overgrown golf course. See, there is the dogleg par five with the green hidden in amongst that coppice of trees on the left. I could walk at my normal stride. There was other game, birds and sights to take my mind off the fact that every step was taking me further and further from the truck and would have to be retraced later in the day. The eland were spectacularly big, butter-coloured and beautiful and I will never forget the first mature cow that walked straight towards our ambush position in amongst a big, fluffy, dark green, no-name shrub. The PH had to physically restrain me from shooting her as I was convinced this was the biggest eland I had ever seen. It was only when the fickle midday breeze changed and the whole herd thundered past that I could see what a massive mistake I would have made as the herd bull clattered by head and shoulders above the middle of the heaving mob.

But none of these truly wonderful animals top my list. Not even the plus 60 inch kudu super bull I eventually shot with Joe Wright near Mavuradona in Zimbabwe in my fifties after all but giving up thoughts of ever finding such a wonderful animal. I remember telling people who would quiz me about my lack of success that, if you gave me a rand for every kilometre I had walked after kudu bulls, it would pay for a Big Five hunt in the best place, at the best time of year with the very best PH.

No, bongo are for me the most special of these very special animals. I remember reading in my thirties – I think it was one of J.A. Hunter’s books – that, despite hunting the animal seriously for some 30 years, he had never managed to shoot a bongo bull. What I found so interesting about this statement
was, firstly, that a man of his skill and experience could
hunt anything on earth for 30 years and not shoot one and,
secondly, I had not the faintest idea what a bongo was.

But my curiosity was peaked and I soon remedied that. The
first colour photograph of a live bongo simply took my breath
away and I confess, even today, I sometimes catch myself
holding my breath when I see them. To me, they are the most
dramatically beautiful of all the game animals that Africa has
to offer – all 129 species and subspecies recognized by
Rowland Ward and currently available on licence.

I knew then and there that I wanted to hunt one in its natural
habitat more than anything else although it took me a number
of years before I had saved up the money and my research had
pinpointed the right guide and place. It is no exaggeration to
say that it became the defining hunt in my life. I have never
before or since trained or prepared as hard and yet, despite
this, lost seven kilograms on the three week hunt. It was my
first hunt outside Southern Africa and, to say I was a little
nervous, would be like asking if the Kennedys were a little
gun shy.

I saw my first animal "in lewende lywe" as we entered a small
glade deep in the rain forest on our way back to the truck
late one afternoon. The tiny tinkling stream cutting the glade
in half was in deep, dank shade but a shaft of sunlight
illuminated the bright, reddish tan side split into strips by
thick, toothpaste white, bold stripes as the bongo lifted its
head to calmly survey the interlopers into its domain. I have
the clearest recollection of watching the crystal clear drops
of water drip from the elegant muzzle as we appraised one
another. A sinuous, blue-black arm stretched towards me
holding out my Brno.375 before I heard a voice say one word,
"Female!" Down periscope, heart beat slows, adrenalin
retreats, calm returns.

I was dumbstruck! I had never seen anything remotely as
dramatically beautiful in the bush in my life! The stark contrast of the green on green rainforest colours and textures only exaggerated the beautiful, smooth, tan coat and the washing powder white stripes. In a word, "Awesome!"

By the tenth day on the tracks of the same bongo bull, I was beyond tired. My feet were blistered from constant emersion in the wet rain forest streams and rivulets followed by hard, fast walks across the brick hard savannah. I was brain damaged by the ability to close on the bull to the extent we could hear him eating but still not see him and have no shot. I was distraught at the number of times he picked up our scent, ran out of the rain forest, across the savannah, into another patch of rain forest and then played games with us as we followed his huge spoor.

On the tenth night we actually slept on his tracks on the forest floor without food or shelter so as to be able to pick up his spoor at first light. Only the head tracker, Martin, and I went forward the next morning. There had been no rain for the previous three days and the forest was dry and noisy. Within touching distance of the bull, an unseen colobus monkey spooked him and he reverted to his savannah trick. We followed doggedly behind although, truth to tell, I had given up mentally. I was going home like many before me without a bongo. Par for the course I felt.

Suddenly, Martin scolded me for making too much noise. "Doucement. Le bangena c’est ici (Slowly, the bongo is here)," he whispered in a voice barely above a breath. Martin had long since made me a believer of his unbelievable tracking skills and I immediately unhooked my .416 Rigby from over my shoulder and held it in my hands across my chest my eyes x-raying the savannah ahead. A few hundred paces further the bush erupted to my right. I caught a glimpse of tan and white as it sprinted across our front and stopped abruptly behind a bush enshrouded tree with about two feet of rump sticking out.
The rifle came up by itself. The butt found the nook in my shoulder and the 1.5-6×42 Zeiss Diavari Z aligned automatically with my right eye. I knew where the shoulder of the bull was behind the tree trunk because I knew because I knew and the rifle fired itself. The bull dropped in its tracks and Martin and I turned to look at one another with the same question mark in our eyes. Side by side, stepping high over the tall savannah grasses, we silently approached the downed animal. He was lying on his left side as if fast asleep and I shot him unnecessarily a second time in the middle of his back.

Neither of us said a word. We stood silently, heads bowed, gazing our fill at the most magnificent animal I had ever hunted. Martin eventually turned to me and hugged me hard around the shoulders and said, "Restez vous ici (You stay here)," as he turned to go and fetch the others back at the salt lick. As he left, a tan coloured butterfly landed on the huge head of the bongo bull and, without warning, tears suddenly streamed down my face. It was not as if I was weeping but almost as if the emotions, which had ebbed and flowed through me over the previous ten days, simply overflowed.

The next day was one of the most extraordinary I have ever experienced. Every now and then my feet would involuntarily take me back to the skinning shed to gaze yet again at the bongo’s skin and horns. It felt, quite literally, as if they were walking above the ground and I had this weird but wonderful feeling that I was floating. And the thought entered my head for the very first time that maybe, just maybe, if I kept on working hard, practicing and preparing thoroughly, I might, in the years ahead, become a good hunter.