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Buffalo
in the **Long Grass**



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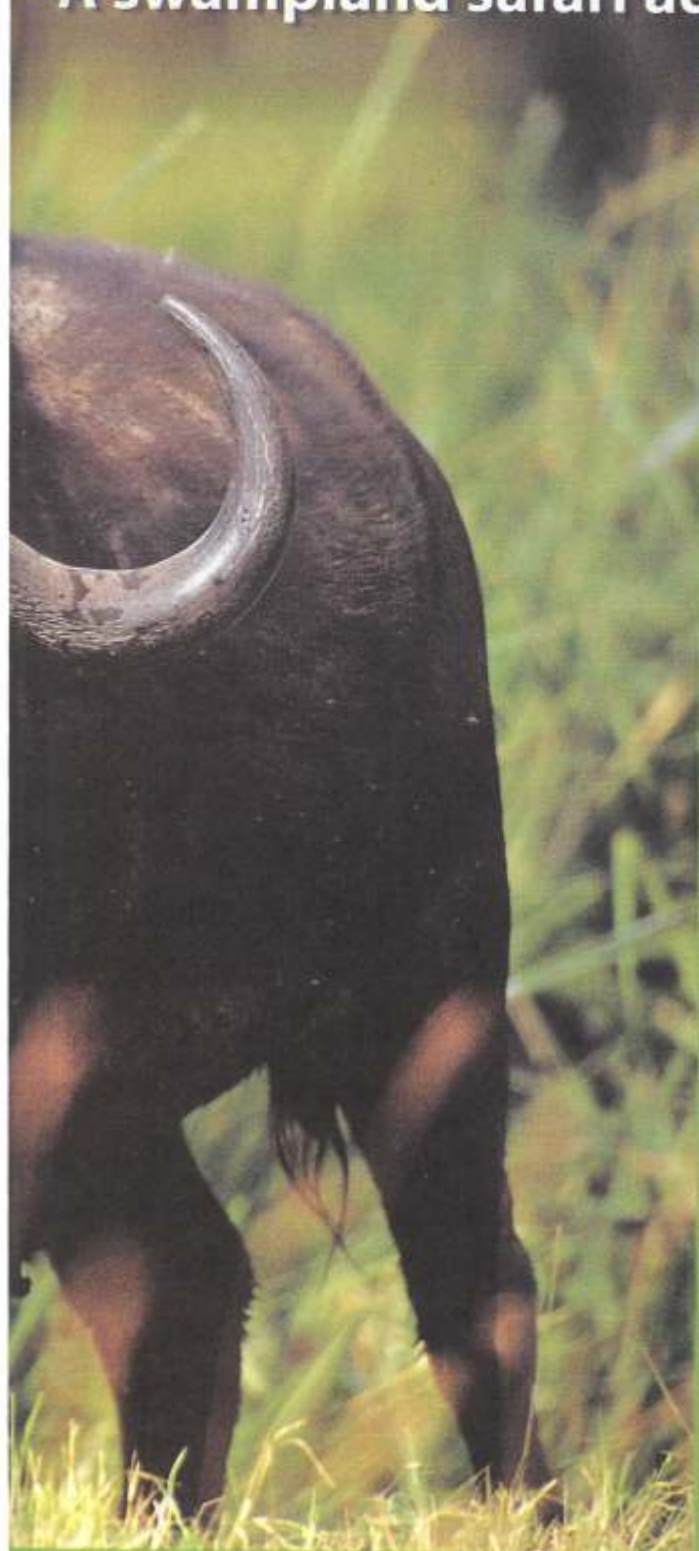
AUGUST 2005

Buffalo in the



Long Grass

A swampland safari adventure in Mozambique



Story and photos
by Gary Kramer

The Land Cruiser came to an abrupt stop and our guide pointed toward the long grass a hundred yards away. Barely visible through the tall, golden stalks were several black forms. As we moved closer, three massive Cape buffalo bulls came into focus, staring at us with a gaze that raised the hair on the back of my neck.

That encounter was on my first trip to Africa in 1990 while on a game-viewing safari in Botswana. After that, I was determined to return to Africa with a rifle in hand and a Cape buffalo hunt on the agenda. It took me fourteen years to make my dream a reality, but last August, I finally had my chance in the Zambezi Delta of Mozambique, one of the most remote places on the African continent. The mighty Zambezi River (often spelled Zambeze in this area) flows from the Congo and Angola through Zambia, over Victoria Falls, and through Zimbabwe before entering Mozambique, where it spills into the Indian Ocean. As it nears the coast, the Zambezi forms a massive delta—a region of reeds and water during the wet season and swamp and grass during the dry season.

Professional hunter Glen Haldane of Zambeze Delta Safaris was waiting as the Cessna 206 touched down on the landing strip. A sign at the remote camp let me know I had arrived at "Coutada 11" (Hunting Concession 11), a huge area of the delta southeast of Marromeu.

The next day, we embarked on a three-hour drive to a spike camp that would provide access to the buffalo herds. It was a wild ride made even more challenging



The area's vast herds of buffalo were visible from the plane on the way to camp. Flocks of cattle egrets are never far from the herds.



The author with his hard-earned buffalo.

by the trailer we towed behind the Land Cruiser. On the trailer was an Argo—a six-wheel-drive tracked vehicle. Over a lunch of nyala steaks, rice, fresh vegetables, and a Castle beer at our tent camp, we discussed the hunt. Even though it was the dry season, late rains left much of the delta covered with water. The Argo would allow us to travel in shallow water and over muddy terrain to areas far from camp. Without the amphibious vehicle, reaching the herds would be virtually impossible.

Late that afternoon, Glen decided we needed some meat so I picked up the custom Sako bolt action chambered for .416 Remington Magnum and half a dozen cartridges that looked more like tubes of lipstick than shells. There were softnose and solid bullets, all 400 grain.

“For buffalo we will load a softnose for the first shot then follow up with three solids in the magazine,”

Glen said. "But right now we are after a warthog, so load a solid when the time comes."

Glen and I, along with a tracker and skinner, jumped in the Land Cruiser. A mile from camp we came upon a pair of warthogs, so we left the vehicle and set out on foot. After a fifteen-minute stalk, we moved within a hundred yards of the warthogs, both young males perfect for the pot. Glen set up the shooting sticks—three sticks connected together at the top with a length of inner tube rubber. When one of the warthogs stopped, I pulled the trigger. The .416 belled and the animal dropped in its tracks, the 400-grain solid passing through the tough-skinned animal like the proverbial knife through butter. We hurried back to the vehicle to fetch the skinner as the sun turned the African sky crimson.

The next morning, Glen, our tracker, Nazua, and I jumped in the Land Cruiser and drove to the edge of the swamp, where we offloaded the Argo. What looked like dry grassland from a distance was actually a grassy swamp with several inches of standing water along with towering papyrus beds and chest-deep hippo channels. Periodically, we stopped the Argo and stood on the seats to glass the surrounding area. The delta is as flat as a pool table and the height gained by standing in the Argo was vital. By 10 A.M., we were at least five miles from the Land Cruiser. The mud, water, mosquitoes, and relentless sun made the ride a test of endurance. Still, I was glad to be in the Argo and not sloshing through the water on foot.

Suddenly Glen said, "I found them," and pointed toward the southwest.

"I don't see anything," I said.

"Look for the cattle egrets," Glen said. "Where there are egrets, there are buffalo. The egrets follow the herds, foraging on insects the buffalo disturb as they walk." When we got to within a quarter-mile of the herd, we left the Argo and continued on foot.

For the next four hours we waded waist-deep in hippo channels, slogged through the mud, and busted our way through papyrus beds as we tracked the herd. As hard as we tried, it was impossible to close the distance. At about 3 P.M., Glen said we needed to head back to the Argo in order to make it back to the vehicle before dark. Even with a seasoned tracker, negotiating the swamps at night was not a wise idea, and once the sun set the mosquitoes would become unbearable. By the time we reached the Land Cruiser it was dark, the mosquitoes were out, and we were bone-tired and hungry. A hot shower and hearty meal were waiting in camp, and when my head hit the pillow I didn't roll over until the 5 A.M. wake-up call the next morning.

As the sun rose in the cloudless sky, we were in the Argo heading toward the area where we'd abandoned the chase the day before. Nazua picked up the tracks and took the lead. It was easy to see where the buffalo had crossed a hippo channel then moved onto a grassy plain. Eventually, we were close enough to glass the herd—a hundred animals: cows, calves, young bulls, and few big, mature



PH Glen Haldane and tracker Nazua study the buffalo herd.



The amphibious Argo was the only way to get around the swamps.



Trackers emerge from the long grass with the spoils of a very successful buffalo hunt.



A double and a bolt-action rifle: Both are good choices for buffalo.

chaps. The chest-high grass provided concealment as we slowly moved to within 150 yards of the animals. I put my binoculars on the group in front of us and my heart started pounding.

Glen whispered in my ear, "The fourth animal from the left is a mature

bull with a good boss—he'll go at least 38 inches." It was our shooter!

For the next hour, the bull played hide and seek in the herd, never providing a clear shot. Eventually, Glen said, "If he faces us, take a frontal shot. It might be our only opportunity."

"If I'm going to shoot a buff in the chest," I said, "we need to get closer."

The midday sun and humidity made the top half of my body as wet as the bottom half as we crawled through the long grass, closing the distance by another thirty yards.

"When I give the word, stand up slowly and I'll set up the sticks. Be ready," Glen said in a whisper. He nodded and we stood upright; in one fluid motion, the shooting sticks were set and the .416 found a rest.

Just then the wind shifted and the buffalo snapped to attention, facing us.

"He's the third animal from the right; wait until he clears," said Glen.

Part of the herd was moving off and the cow that had been in the way stepped aside.

"Shoot him in the chest," Glen urged. I was already squeezing the trigger. It must have been the adrenaline that prevented me from hearing the muzzle blast or feeling the punishing recoil.


"He's down, but reload and be ready," Glen said.

I ejected the spent round and slammed the bolt shut, chambering a solid. Less than a minute later, the bull stood up and whirled away.

"Shoot him again!" Glen yelled.

I found the target in the scope and pulled the trigger, sending a 400-grain solid toward the buffalo. A puff of dust from the buff's hide indicated a hit. We dropped the sticks and ran closer as the buffalo staggered away. Then it stopped for a split second and I fired offhand, delivering another bullet to the shoulder, and the beast toppled. The buff's death bellows and my heavy breathing were the only sounds I could hear.

We approached cautiously, and at fifteen yards Glen told me to shoot the bull in the neck to make sure. The last thing we needed was a "dead" buffalo causing trouble. I fired my last round. Congratulations were in order, followed by the customary photos, butchering, and capping of the trophy. Closer inspection revealed the first shot would have been fatal, the second shot was too far back to do much damage, and the third shot had anchored the buffalo for good.

That night, I ate jumbo prawns until I could eat no more, enjoyed a hot shower and cold gin and tonic, and heard the sawing call of leopards one last time. I remember now the heat of midday and the sweat trickling down my back during the stalk through the swamps, all of it leading up to the moment I planned in my mind for nearly fifteen years. The pain and the pleasure of it makes the memory the best I know. 

Contact Zambeze Delta Safaris at 011-27-34-212-3624 or e-mail gamehunt@trustnet.co.za. Web site: gameandbirdhuntersafrica.com

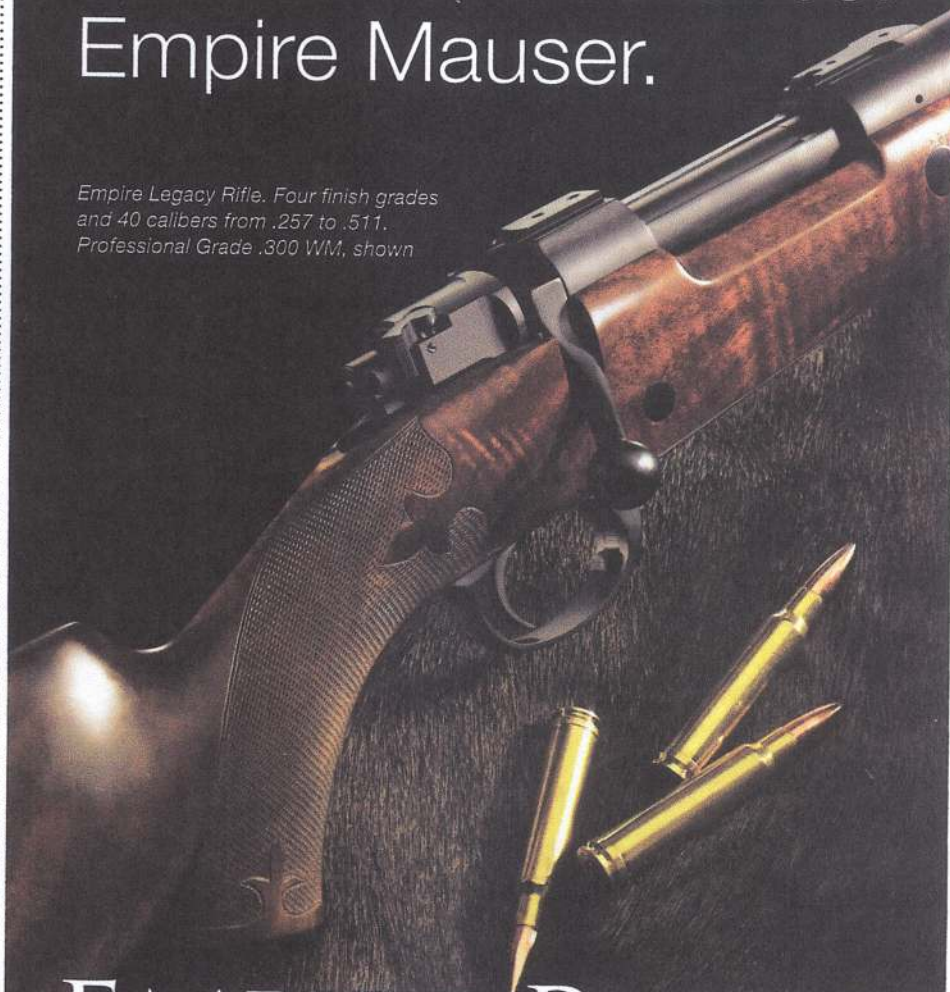
Traveling to Mozambique

Mozambique was a Portuguese colony until it gained independence in 1975. Beginning in the early 1970s, the country was ravaged by a Communist-backed civil war that lasted more than twenty years. Since the hostilities ended in 1992, the country has been on the road to recovery. Still one of the poorest countries in Africa, it has an economy based on agriculture, fishing, mining, and a growing tourism industry. For a decade, the country has been governed by a democratic process with a president elected by popular vote.

The hunting season in the Zambezi Delta is June 1 through November 30. In June and early July, much of the Delta can be flooded and access is challenging. By late July in most years, the water has receded and access improves. August and September are prime months with drier conditions and cooler temperatures. By October, temperatures increase and by November it is hot and humid. Some of the best trophies are taken in October and November, when burning has reduced the grass available for forage and the buffalo and plains game are more concentrated.

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