

Highlighted between late afternoon sun and shadows, a herd of wild elands slip eastward through a dun grass and thorn-bush covered flat, flanked by low, sandy dunes on PH Johan Kotze's large ranch near Aroab, Namibia.

The KALAHARI ROLLER COASTER

Hunting Desert Dunes for Gemsbok and Springbok

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The ultimate roller coaster, I suspect, rolls up and over the wind-shaped, red sand dunes of the Kalahari desert, about 80 kilometers north and a bit east of Aroab, Namibia. My last steel-track roller coaster ride had been decades earlier in a Virginia theme park, and as cars left the station, I distinctly recall loudspeakers playing "Amazing Grace."

Every time our PH, Johan Kotze, revved the bare-bones hunting truck up the dune, and then accelerated down the reverse slope to stay upright, the music and words of "Nearer My God to Thee," came instantly to mind. My former first sergeant, Paul Nichols, and I clung with varying success to the sides of the 4X4, clutching rifles, ricocheting off parts of the truck, and ducking bouncing binoculars, packs and water bottles.

We were hunting southern oryx (gemsbok) and Kalahari springbok across a landscape many folks would consider waterless wasteland. Annually the rainfall measures as little as 25 millimeters.

The dunes of the Kalahari lay hundreds or thousands of meters apart, cresting perhaps 30 to 50 meters high, with slopes varying from mild to near heart-stopping vertical. Unlike the picturesque, wind-sculpted dunes of North Africa's Sahara desert, the Kalahari dunes show considerable vegetation on the surface – mainly dry, dull yellow grasses, and thorny bushes. Between the dunes, alert and wary herds of spear-horned gemsbok and graceful springbok live and graze, seeking green vegetation for vitamins



A one-shot kill, this typical Kalahari springbok trophy dropped to a flawless shoulder shot at 191-meters from the crest of a dune. The white hair on the ram's back, described as a flare or fan, appears for only a few moments after death and then fades.

and nutrition. By arid necessity, though, the animals seasonally have to dig for roots as a primary food and water source. Superbly adapted to the desert, gemsboks and springboks can live for weeks without drinking; they take water from coarse desert grasses and thorny shrubs. For essentials such as calcium, a gemsbok will eat bones from the skeletons of animals that didn't survive the long months without green vegetation.

Rain comes in summer, and we were hunting the cooler, waning months of the southern hemisphere's winter. Rough, irregular, dry grass-topped dunes were plentiful, but precipitation had been in short supply for almost six months. As much as anything, the landscape looked like western Texas or southern Arizona but with better fences and longer thorns on the bushes. It seems every bush in this part of Namibia defends itself with four centimeter-long thorns – apparently all bushes without thorns have already been eaten.

The Kalahari is not a land for easy walking, unless you are a gemsbok or springbok.

The origins of Johan's hunting truck seemed obscure, as it appeared to incorporate parts of vehicles of various manufacture, plus a considerable quantity of reinforcing steel. Whoever constructed this remarkable and very capable vehicle really understood rough terrain driving and V8 power, but had no regard for unnecessary luxuries like fenders, hoods, grills and lights – and doors. The shooting seats in the back proved comfortable enough, and the top of the cab served as a stable shooting rest. Our dignified Nama tracker, John, hung precariously to the welded pipe support behind the shooting seat. With a dexterity that bespeaks considerable desert trekking experience, John always remained attached as the truck jumped and bounced up and over the crests of hundreds of dunes.

Kalahari Hunting Safaris bills their private ranch hunts as fair chase, and our jostled, rattling experience confirms their claim. Hunting the dunes without a truck is essentially impossible. Somehow the PH must reach the crest of a dune, very quickly scan the area between dunes for game, even more quickly determine which animals are respectable trophies, and then position one or two hunters downwind for a clean shot. Gemsboks and springboks easily outrun and outmaneuver the hunting truck – four legs are vastly superior to four-wheel drive in the dry sand. All of our shots, except one, connected at distances in excess of 180 meters.

The Kalahari Desert holds the largest population of springboks anywhere, and the license allowed two rams per hunter. I was still thinking about religious music when Johan gunned the truck up the 15th large dune or so, and spotted a nice, representative springbok ram watching us from his territory between dunes.

By agreement, I took the first shot, resting the .30-06 across the top of the truck, and angling slightly to the right. The display in the Leica rangefinder showed 191 meters in crisp red numbers, and it took only one 165-grain Sierra bullet to drop the ram with a perfect shoulder shot. A pocket-like flap midway down the springbok's back extends to the tail, covering the white hair underneath. Immediately after death, the flap opens briefly, revealing a characteristic fan of white hair. The fan quickly disappears, though, so quick work by a camera-savvy PH is the best way to capture this remarkable image.

Several kilometers distant and many dunes later, we rocked to a stop, with two really nice springbok rams dead ahead. Paul, a traditionalist at heart, hunted the Kalahari with an old-style Ruger rifle in the classic 7mm Mauser

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Another springbok ram, taken about noon at 200-meters distance, shows how perfectly the hair colors blend with the dull, yellow grasses and reddish sand of the Kalahari desert.



With meter-long horns, a gemsbok bull is a match for almost any Kalahari desert predator. Fast and wary, gemsbok can easily outpace safari hunting vehicles, and are virtually impossible to stalk on foot across open terrain. Two hundred forty meters distant, this bull took three 165-grain Sierra GameKing bullets before dropping.



Paul Nichols, SCI national member from Omaha, NE, chose this non-typical, curved horn cow as one of two gemsbok on his license.

The Kalahari Roller Coaster

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Weakened by long months without green vegetation, this female ostrich was unable to rise to its feet as we approached. With six or more months between rains, animals in the Kalahari desert suffer vitamin deficiencies from the absence of green vegetation, and only the hardiest survive in this severe environment. This female, unfortunately, did not have the stamina to last until the rains came.

chambering. When his ram dropped, the other moved to the right. As the Sako butt plate recoiled into my shoulder, the second springbok went down – both with precise shoulder shots. Under a mid-day sun, Paul's ram lay 180 meters distant and mine fell about 20 meters farther up the dune.

The ranches for this hunt are vast in scope, as the conditions for cattle are pretty severe. On more than 10,000 hectares, Johan Kotze runs about 300 cows. The neighboring ranch, about 50 kilometers distant, seems to need about 25 hectares per cow. The gemsbok herd that routinely stays on Johan's ranch numbers about 600 – a number that in a good year the land can support. In dry years, the lack of rain greatly restricts the grazing, so the absence of anything green to eat contributes to a vitamin deficiency in the animals. Each year, the gemsbok herd births about 350 to 400 calves, intensifying the competition for food. Realistically, the gemsbok herd faces three alternatives – starvation, round-up for sale to neighboring ranchers, or intense trophy and management hunting.

Todd Rathner, owner of T. Jeffrey Safaris, mentioned the remarkable quantities of game available in Namibia when we booked the safari. T. Jeffrey Safaris offers affordable hunt packages in Namibia and South Africa, and, combined with Kalahari Hunting Safaris, delivered a

distinctly first class experience.

Late afternoon shadows began advancing as we rolled up, over and down sandy ridges that had to look like stubby tentacles of a giant octopus if viewed from an airplane. The herd of gemsboks seemed as surprised as we were when the truck dropped off one ridge. Naturally, they ran. Johan zoomed up and over the tops and tried hard to defy gravity on the downward slopes, as gemsboks and PH, both, accelerated to get the downwind advantage. We lost the race, and paused in the truck for hearts and stomachs to catch up.

"Did you see the one with the curved horns?" Paul gasped, "I'd prefer a non-typical representative like that one."

The truck coasted down one more stomach-churning drop and then, inexplicably, the herd turned back toward us. It took three more drops before the PH braked into a very good shooting position, 180 meters down wind from the herd. Paul hit the crooked horned cow hard, twice, before she went down fighting. Moments later, I heard Johan say, "Shoot the fifth one on the left," and I dropped the fifth gemsbok from the right side of the herd with a 109-meter shot. Actually, Johan's binoculars had turned to the other side of the herd, where he designated the fifth one from the left – a striking bull. The fifth one on the right side of the herd was a cow, bearing long, but thinner horns. She was pregnant, and I felt sadness that her calf would never be born.

Three springboks, two gemsboks and another morning into the hunt, we lurched forward as Johan braked sharply and reversed toward a bush with a brown spot at the bottom. The brown spot, almost unnoticeable to the untrained eye, became a gemsbok calf. Probably born the previous night, it still wore the dried mucus of after-birth, confirming its mother had not even cleaned her baby before abandoning it. "An old cow," Johan thought out loud, "She had to leave her calf to ensure her own survival." The little calf was hungry, and tried to suckle a camera lens, the gear shift lever and everyone's elbow. He rode in the front passenger's seat as we took another springbok and successfully raced a herd of gemsbok for the downwind shooting advantage. It was a 50 kilometers drive back to Johan's ranch before the baby gemsbok got its first meal of milk, eggs and cream from a bottle and nipple. For his first 24 hours of life, the little guy had a pretty excit-



Abandoned by its aging mother, this newborn gemsbok calf had only hours to live when PH Johan Kotze spotted it under a thorn bush. The little guy spent a day in the safari truck, and after trying to suckle the gear shift lever, camera lenses and elbows, got its first meal at Johan's ranch. In several years, he'll be a worthy bull in the gemsbok herd in the Kalahari desert near Aroab.

ing day. I was relieved and thankful this gemsbok calf, unlike yesterday's, found a chance to live and grow into a worthy bull in a few years.

Circumstances turned less fortunate for two floundering ostriches on the first shooting day. The female, garbed with grey feathers, struggled without effect to get up as the truck approached. Male ostriches are black, and the one we found had worn one wing down to the bone in a hopeless struggle to regain his footing. Ostriches need something green in the diet to maintain the correct vitamin balance, Johan explained, and there has been nothing green to eat for months.

Another hunting party, guided by Kalahari Hunting Safaris' PH Deon van Wyk, chanced on a gemsbok and later a springbok. Each animal ran about 100 meters, and then fell, unable to continue or gain their footing. Sadly, but correctly, little choice existed except to end the animals' suffering. The Kalahari in winter imposes a severe regime on its animal populations. Without well-reasoned game management practices, many more animals would fall to hunger and experience slow death by starvation.

The gemsboks on an adjacent ranch saw us first, being alert, wary and very agile. The herd numbered almost 40 animals and, thankfully, two mature bulls milled among the cows. As we closed on the last gemsbok in the string, the herd split and galloped in dusty, different directions. Slipping over more dunes, we watched three solitary bulls, but none were real trophies. Our next, carefully planned intercept of one herd failed when they outmaneuvered us, turning east and



Our rugged safari truck proved reliable and surprisingly comfortable, but was not invulnerable to long, sharp Kalahari thorns. Our PH's son, Hendrik Kotze and native tracker Sakman exchange a very flat tire for a good one.

then reversing west. Johan pushed the truck in a big circling loop, rolled down a fence line, and then blasted over a very large dune with a lot of bumps. Somehow, Paul and I hung on to the rifles and the truck for the final lunge.

We slipped around a smaller dune, and faced-off with the herd. Johan and I had worked on our signals, so this time I slipped a Sierra GameKing bullet into the designated bull. As the bullet sped across the 240 meters separating us, the bull took one step left. Struck in the flank, he slowed markedly, and moved to the rear of the herd, where a second shot anchored him. One shot more in the neck, and the trophy grew still. His meter-long horns with thick bases persuaded us that hand-to-horn combat with a gemsbok bull would be a very one-sided, short-lived contest. Later that morning, Paul took the second bull whose horns were even longer than the ones the first gemsbok sported.

The private ranches open to Kalahari Hunting Safaris contained an abundance of gemsboks and springboks, along with ostriches, red hartebeests, steenboks and elands. Neither Paul nor I doubted that we would each take two trophy gemsboks and two springboks on this segment of the hunt. I shot a rather nice red hartebeest and steenbok on Johan's ranch. The PH, Johan, and tracker, John, expertly knew the hunting grounds and game. We especially appreciated Johan's keen insight for picking out a trophy with just a fleeting glance at a fast-moving group of animals.

As you might expect, the lodge accommodations and dining were first class. Two days after we shot an animal, it became the featured dinner dish. My vote went for the springbok backstrap. Paul always selected gemsbok fillet – and, deliciously, we gained a couple of kilos. 🐾