

## **Alistair James in Tanzania**

I drove the landcruiser up to the blind. It was 5:30 am and still very much night time. I figured we had at least 45 minutes until we would be able to see. I took the clients' and my own rifles down from the gun rack and set them inside of the blind. Both of us settled in and I signaled the driver to take the vehicle away and leave just the two of us in the predawn silence 60 yards away from the leopard bait.

I had hung a Hartebeest leg on the tree a few days ago. Several fruitless days went by checking baits we had put up all around the concession. Yesterday morning we had drove up to this bait, and immediately I saw that it had been hit. The freshly eaten flesh was still a light pink in color. The sun hadn't yet dried it out. From the size and depth of the claw marks on the tree and the amount of meat the leopard had eaten, it looked like a very good Tom. Very little meat remained on the bones, so I decided that we would check the rest of our baits, and come back around midday to add more meat and build a blind.

As we came back to the bait with a truckload of grass and poles I saw that the leopard had come back to the bait after we left. He had come back in the middle of the day and cleaned every last scrap of meat off of the remaining bones! I knew that this was a good sign that we would see the leopard again during daylight hours so I quickly set about building the blind and putting more meat in the tree. After finishing we ate some lunch and returned to the blind early to wait for the leopard to come back. We sat until dark to no avail as a group of hyenas came in to investigate the bait thus preventing the leopard from showing up.

This morning I was confident that we would see the leopard. Not even five minutes went by since the vehicle left us before I heard the distinctive sound of claws on bark as the leopard jumped into the tree to feed. Then the ripping of meat and cracking of the bones as the leopard devoured his meal. The noises that cats make when feeding are always impressive, and this one was no exception. The game was now one of waiting. We had to allow the day to break so that we could have enough light to clearly see the leopard and make a clean shot. In Tanzania it is illegal and considered unethical to shoot leopard with a spotlight, so we waited.

I pointed at my watch and signaled 'twenty' with my fingers to the client, meaning that we needed to wait twenty more minutes to have enough light to see the leopard clearly. I had already been looking at the cat as it was feeding with my night vision binoculars and could see that it was a big male. As we sat enduring seeming eternity until daybreak, suddenly I heard a 'thump!' as the big tom jumped out of the tree and hit the ground. Dammit! I thought to myself, just five more minutes and we would have had enough light to shoot. But no, the leopard had to leave early!

As the light eventually filled in, I started scanning the area for any sign that the tom was still around. Finally I saw the flick of his tail, and could then make out his ears and the top of his head. He was laying in the grass underneath the bait. I watched him like this with my binoculars for about five minutes. Finally he stood up, stretched out and walked over to the base of the tree and jumped up onto the branch in one fluid motion where the bait hung. I tapped the client to signal him to shoot. It is important to

work out a silent communications system between the PH and the client when you are in the blind. Sometimes shots can be made easier by waiting until the cat stands a particular way, or at other times a female or immature leopard will jump into the tree and feed in lieu of the big male you are waiting for.

The big tom stood perfectly on the tree. The shot rang out, but instead of being knocked over or falling dead to the report, the leopard sprang off the limb and bounding away into the ravine behind the bait giving off a series of deep grunts as he ran. This usually is a bad sign.

I took my gun, which was a .375 Winchester pre-64 and walked up to the base of the bait tree to see what I would find on the ground. I found a spattering of light blood and a couple of bone fragments. I guessed that the leopard had been hit low, probably through the leg. Now like I said I only had a .375 with which to follow the leopard. I usually prefer to use a heavier caliber for following any dangerous game, but my regular back up gun, a .458 Lott was taken from me by the Congolese Army a couple of months earlier. But that is another story.

Anyway, the .375 was what I had and I was going to have to use it. By this time the vehicle had arrived after hearing the shot. The looks of elation on everybody's faces disappeared when I told them what had happened. My tracker got down and took his machete and followed me to where I had last seen the leopard dive into the ravine behind the bait tree. We looked at the ground and could see the trail of pushed over green leaves where the leopard had run. I could by the smears in the ground along the track that the leopard was dragging a foot badly.

So we followed slowly into the thick green vegetation bordering the ravine, to see what we could find. As soon as we approached the edge of the ravine, which was a seven or eight foot drop down and about ten feet across to the opposite side, we heard the leopard grunt loudly and begin to charge. At the time I was standing above the ravine and the leopard was down in the bottom. The strangest thing happened as I knelt down with my gun ready waiting to be able to see the cat as it came. He cut off his charge halfway to me and turned around!. This is very unusual. I think what happened was that the tom, having a bad leg, decided against charging up the wall of the ravine. The leopard stopped and turned around simultaneously to leave in a streak of yellow and white. It happened so quickly that I didn't have a chance to get a shot off as the leopard disappeared and ran up and into the brush on the opposite side of the dry river.

I was reluctant at first to follow the leopard over to his side and into the thick vegetation he had chosen to hide in. I decided to have my tracker throw some sticks and rocks into the place where the leopard was waiting in order to try and flush him out and maybe get a clear shot as he ran across an open area. One stick, a rock, another stick, and then 'thwock!' the stick must have hit the leopard as he lay in the grass. The cat gave out another guttural grunt and started to run paralleling the ravine and the bordering vegetation but not coming out into the open. The cat lay up again not ten yards further along from where he had been. I told the tracker to throw some more sticks into the bush where we thought the leopard was laying to try to move him again. The same thing happened with the leopard giving out a terrible growl and moving a little bit further. He just wouldn't come out into the open to where I could maybe get a shot off. I was still trying to stand on the opposite side of the ravine to try to put some open ground between us as to give myself a little bit of extra time should the leopard decide to charge. Finally

the leopard just holed up, and no amount of sticks or stones could budge him. We had a good idea within a ten yard square area where the leopard was. The only option now was to follow the cat into the brush on his side of the ravine. As we back tracked slightly and then crossed and walked up the opposite wall of the dry river bed and into the bush on the other side, we immediately picked up the visible tracks where the leopard had run sloppily kicking up a lot of dirt along the way. Following the trail I stopped to get a better look at the brush in front of me. Suddenly my eyes picked up the slightest movement about six yards in front and to the right of where I stood. I then saw a tiny not more than one inch square patch of leopard skin moving slightly in the brush where I had noticed the movement. Not hesitating, I unloaded my rifle, four shots in all, right into the bush. Luckily I killed the cat with my first shot, and he didn't make it more than five feet closer to me from the moment that I saw him move. It turned out that the leopard had been lying down inside of a bush, and the movement I saw was him standing up as we approached too closely. Everybody was very relieved at ending a stressful morning and we dragged the cat out into the open where we could appreciate and take some good pictures of a truly beautiful animal.

These are situations that a PH dreads when he goes hunting. On the other hand it is what defines dangerous game hunting, and honestly adds another level of excitement and doubt to the hunt. This story also shows how unpredictable wounded game can be at times. It is unusual in my opinion for a wounded leopard to half way charge and then turn and run away. I think that this unpredictability actually adds to the danger factor and is the cause of many hunters' sometimes fatal mistakes. After experiencing a couple of situations where wounded game doesn't charge, very often the hunter will get a false sense of confidence and be more prone to commit careless errors. I think it is important to constantly remind oneself of the unpredictability of dangerous game.