

# Problem Animals

Problem animals are a contentious subject that often provokes heated debate. It is a matter best avoided but as a hunter who was frequently called in to deal with them, I do not have the luxury of avoidance – not if I am to tell their story. There simply is no easy solution. When wild animals impact negatively on a farmer's livelihood, it is inevitable that he will react with aggression and, unless the animal has commercial value to compensate him financially, his reaction often takes the form of a hunter being asked to remove the animal. It then rests on the shoulders of the ethical hunter to use his discretion. In defence of all farmers, I must tell you that it is mind boggling to see the havoc that a troop of baboons can wreak in a maize field or apple orchard. Similarly, the damage a sounder of wild pigs make in a potato patch or a flock of a thousand Egyptian geese in a field of wheat. At the end of the day, they are neither guilty nor innocent. They are simply animals caught up in the activities of man. Sometimes they are shown mercy, sometimes not. Here are some of their stories.

## Old “Sekelstert”

In the Afrikaans vernacular, we fondly refer to a baboon as “sekelstert” which simply means “sickle tail”, a nickname which alludes to the position in which he holds his tail when walking.

Let me tell you, old sickle tail, a.k.a. the Chackma Baboon (*Papio Ursinus*), is not easily caught off guard. Time after countless time I've tried to sneak up on an unsuspecting troop, all to no avail. They are very vigilant, especially when the troop is on the move. On occasion I have come upon them unexpectedly but they are past masters at vanishing into thin air. All I ever got off was a few parting shots. But even a baboon's luck can run out sometimes. In the kloof, beside the apple orchard, the farmer had refurbished an old labourer's cottage and added electricity, warm water, a flushing toilet and a fire place. In short, everything that was needed for a comfortable overnight stay with family or friends. It was here that my wife and I and our daughter Karen spent a pleasant evening around the fire. We were replete with mutton chops grilled over hot coals and the contents of a bottle of chilled white wine. Our eyelids soon grew heavy and so we made an early night of it.

Nowhere is there greater peace and tranquility than when waking to the sound of the dawn chorus as they greet the sunrise. It invariably reminds me of long forgotten mornings beside the cold ashes of the countless fires on my hunter's journey. For a moment I lay quietly, listening to the birdsong but the many winters in my body chased me out of bed to make my ablutions and to get the coffee going. I had a sneaky feeling about the resident troop of baboons and, as mother and daughter were still fast asleep, I crept around the cottage as quietly as possible. I was busy brushing my teeth when I heard a single “tjwe”, the sound of a young baboon, emanating from the orchard right next to us. Forgotten was the tooth brush and forgotten was the boiling kettle and coffee. In passing, I grabbed my 223 Remington<sup>1)</sup>, extra ammunition, hat and binoculars and sprinted for the orchard. On the run, I filled the rifle's magazine. I had this feeling of ‘today is the day’ and didn't want to run out of fire power.

Have I told you that the mountain side had been burnt bare of all vegetation? Well, two weeks previously, a fire had occurred and burnt down the whole mountainside adjacent to the orchid. There wasn't a single leaf or twig behind which a baboon could hide, just bare rocks and the burnt stalks of grass and shrubs. With hammering heart I ran, dodging from cover to cover, hoping to catch them unawares. A sentinel gave the alarm and the troop tried to escape past me towards the mountain. Too late, I was already in position and they had to pass right in



front of me. At some stage in his life, every hunter I know has had buck fever but I have yet to meet one who had "baboon fever." Well, I confess, I had it! It took me three wild shots to come to my senses and calm down. My fourth shot must have landed next to the troop leader because he and two of his askaris<sup>2)</sup>, changed direction and ran across my front. My fifth tumbled the old general in a cloud of soot and dust. I thought I had anchored him but no, he staggered the last few yards up the ridge and vanished behind an outcrop of rocks.

In running past the cottage, I grabbed some more ammunition and set off after him. Sixty summers is not conducive to mountain climbing but when the adrenaline is pumping then "why?" does not have to give a reason. I could find no blood spoor but at the point where he had vanished, he had left me his "address" on a rock. Whether from pain or shock I couldn't say but voiding his bowels was a sure sign that he was wounded. I found a comfortable vantage point and took my time glassing the valley below. On the one hand, I had to catch my breath and on the other hand, with the sun shining on my back, I wanted to enjoy the serendipity of the moment. A dry scratch in my throat made me cough and with that I saw movement in the kloof below. Through the rifle scope I watched a very unsteady baboon for a moment, then with a gentle squeeze of the trigger, I ended the drama.

He was a huge male with canines that should have ended up in some record book. Through the years he probably caused a lot of damage to orchards but, together with the call of the fish eagle and the yapping of a jackal, his 'boggom' will always say "Africa".

## Rogue

On a separate occasion, I took my grandson, CP, to a remote area of the Karoo, not so much to hunt but to introduce him to the basics of veldt and hunting lore. It was and is an arid region with virtually no open water. Grazing was sparse so the owner ran only a minimum number of sheep on the property, more to maintain a presence than anything else. In passing, he had mentioned that he was having problems with a lone male baboon and would be grateful if I could solve the problem for him.



In baboon society, an alpha male who is ousted from his position may remain on the fringes of the troop only by tenuous consent of the new troop leader. On rare occasions, he is expelled from the troop and condemned to eke out a lonely and precarious existence by himself. He invariably turns rogue and becomes a sly and furtive loner who kills and destroys indiscriminately. A seek-and-destroy mission was out of the question as it would be virtually impossible to find a single baboon in such a large area. However, I knew of a ravine with a pool of water hidden in its shadowy depths, where wild animals came to drink and where it might be possible to ambush him.

Early the following morning we set out for the ravine. In the predawn hush we crept into position, made ourselves comfortable and settled down to wait. As the first rays of the rising sun fell on the rocky outcrop opposite us, I heard the distant bark of a baboon. Minutes later the bark was repeated, only this time much closer. There was movement on the opposite slope and, to my astonishment, a huge male baboon came into view and slowly climbed to the top of the ridge where he sat sunning himself. Through the 'scope I could see that he was an old "madala"- gray and long in the tooth. At the crack of the shot, he slowly pitched forward and tumbled head over heels until he came to rest in the ravine below.

I am not often given to introspection but as I sat beside him, I heard in my mind an echo of a long forgotten truth as expressed in Rudyard Kipling's "Just So Stories". It was about the symbiotic interdependence between mongoose and king cobra. Rikitikitavi, the mongoose, had just killed his arch enemy, the cobra. Jubilant but anguished, he calls out: "We be of one blood, ye and I". Hunter and prey, we are also "of one blood", bound together eternally, so I left him where he had fallen, gone but never to be forgotten.

## Bushpigs and Warthogs

**Bushpigs** (*Potamochoerus larvatus*) , live in forests, woodland and dense riverine thickets - difficult terrain where they can hole up during daytime and easily evade hunters and their dogs. They are quite sociable and found in sounders of up to twelve individuals, consisting of a dominant boar and sow, other females and juveniles. They can be very aggressive, especially when they have young. In



the Western Cape, with its natural forests, mountainous terrain and abundant water and food, they thrive and have increased to the extent where they are a significant nuisance to farmers.

Earlier in the week we had received a distress call from a farmer on whose property bushpigs were doing extensive damage, so come Friday afternoon we loaded our gear and set out to answer the "call to duty". As the pigs are nocturnal, we would be hunting at night so we took along headlamps - popularly called "bulala" lights. We spent the night walking, stalking and tiring ourselves out, all to no avail, so we returned home disappointed and frustrated. It was Hugo Moolman, my hunting buddy, who came up with the idea of building a "hochsitz", a raised platform that would give us an unobstructed view of the surrounding fields.



It took us two weekends to complete our platform. Firstly, we had to select a suitable site overlooking the area where the pigs regularly rooted, preferably with a backdrop of trees to break the silhouette of the platform. Secondly, followed the arduous process of construction. Four meter long uprights were cut and planted in the soil, followed by cross beams and sawn planks to form the floor. Finally we added a somewhat rickety ladder, up and down which we transported our hunting paraphernalia. I must explain something. We were about ten kilometers from the coast as the crow flies. At night a wet, clinging mist would drift in from the sea causing us considerable discomfort as high and exposed as we were on the hochsitz. In order to insulate ourselves against the weather, we dressed warmly, took along thermos flasks of coffee and the ubiquitous South African panacea for the cold, a bottle of Old Brown Sherry.

Everything was in readiness as we waited for a dark and moonless night to come along. We would have to be quiet and patient as bushpigs are extremely vigilant when foraging in open areas, especially if they have been hunted before. Accompany us in your mind's eye. We were cold, wet and uncomfortable but full of adrenaline and very tensed up. At times we would lie back and dose for a few moments only to jerk awake and listen with baited breath for any indications that the pigs had arrived. This happened quite a few times and, eventually we must have fallen into a deeper sleep because suddenly we were both wide awake with the certain knowledge that they were all around us. We could clearly hear their snuffling and subdued grunts as they fed.

We had tossed a coin and Hugo would shoot first while I operated the shooting light. When I switched it on, we were literally surrounded by pigs so I held the beam steady on a large sow. Hugo's shot rang out and she dropped in her tracks. I switched to the next one and again his shot followed closely. By then chaos had erupted and the pigs were scattering every which way into the night. As abruptly as that, the hunt was over and we had managed to bag two large sows. Our goal achieved for the moment, we had a celebratory nightcap and crept into our sleeping bags to wait for dawn. We offloaded the carcasses at the farmhouse the next morning amidst much surprise and gratitude from the farmer. After a cup of early morning coffee and repeated invitations to return, we said our goodbyes and went home well satisfied with all our night's work. Our preparations and perseverance

had finally come to fruition. We had paid our dues and come of age as bushpig hunters.

We spent many a night on the "hochsitz" and I too eventually got my two pigs in one night but nothing ever equaled the excitement and satisfaction of that first hunt.

To the pigs and a good friend I say: "Weidmans Dank".

**Warthogs** (*Phacochoerus africanus*), are not problem animals to the same extent as bushpigs, probably because generally they do not occur in cultivated areas. They do not make good eating so I have only ever shot them as trophy animals and at that, only occasionally. In the Kalahari, they were originally introduced onto Game Ranches and have subsequently spread to adjoining cattle farms. To cool themselves off in the desert heat, they submerge themselves in the drinking troughs of the cattle. I have it on good authority that the cattle then refuse to drink from the troughs until they are cleaned and filled with fresh water. Can you then blame a farmer for being annoyed at them? Although they presently do not enjoy a high profile as problem animals, through time this situation may change as their numbers increase.

## Jackals



1)

 .223\_Remington

2)

 Askari

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