

THE SPRINGBOK OF MOUNT ETJO – A NAMIBIAN SUCCESS STORY

By Steve Tors

The springbok herd at this well-known game farm / hunting lodge increased from 50 to 5 000 in just 45 years – without any new blood lines being introduced!

In 1975, when I came to Namibia, the hunting industry had just started up and game ranching was in its infancy. The main indigenous trophy animals in our area at the time were kudu, gemsbok, hartebeest and warthog, and the four pigmy antelope, namely klipspringer, duiker, dik-dik and steenbok. My boss and owner of Mount Etjo, Jan Oelofse, had considerable expertise in game capture, and we were able to catch other indigenous animals. We used these to stock a 5 000 ha game-fenced area so we could offer bigger trophy selections to visiting hunters.

We started with an initial herd of about 50 springbok. However, right from the beginning we could see that there would be problems with the large number of cheetahs. In our area there were not any springbok, and I think that was due to these cheetahs. At that time, it was all open range cattle land and the cheetahs were roaming freely in search of prey – which included young gemsbok, kudu and hartebeest, as well as goats, sheep from the neighbouring ranches and some young cattle calves.

The cheetahs were targeted by the farmers and they were shot on sight – which wasn't always easy because cheetahs are probably one of the most difficult big cats to hunt. They don't come to bait and when they are pressured, they simply take off in a flash. Because we had introduced springbok, we ended up with the same problem, as springbok are probably cheetahs' most common prey.

We had an 8' 6" game fence with 22 strands of wire, with the lower strands spaced about 6 inches apart. However, as the saying goes, if a cat can get his head through the opening, he is going to get his whole body through – and that is what happened quite often. So it was an on-going battle to keep the cheetahs at bay so that the springbok could have a chance to breed.

Jan was very hands-on and decided to take the battle to the cheetahs. The first thing he did was to fence the whole area in with a mesh wire from the bottom up to 4-foot high. This was generally effective in keeping them out but they could still find a way in by crawling through warthog holes. Cheetahs don't like climbing that much,

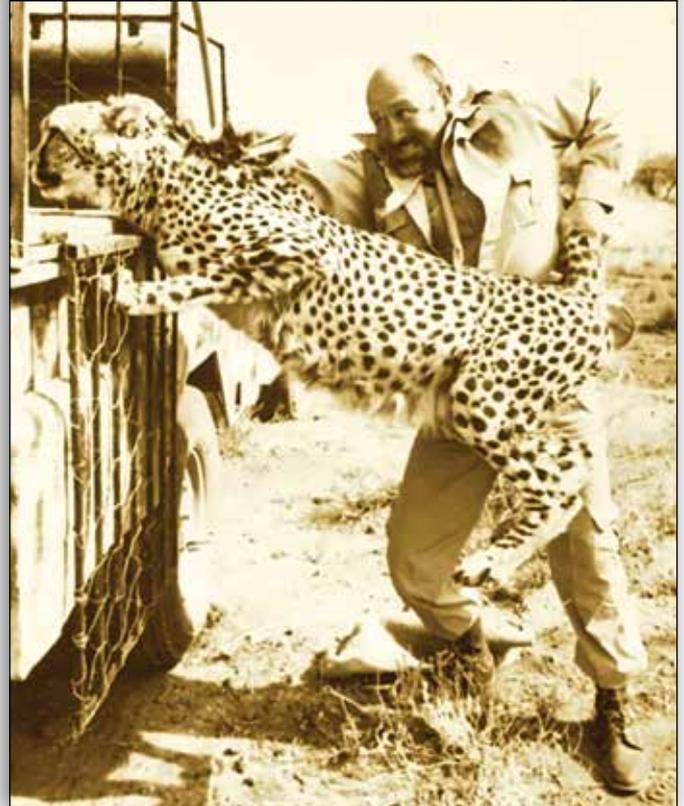
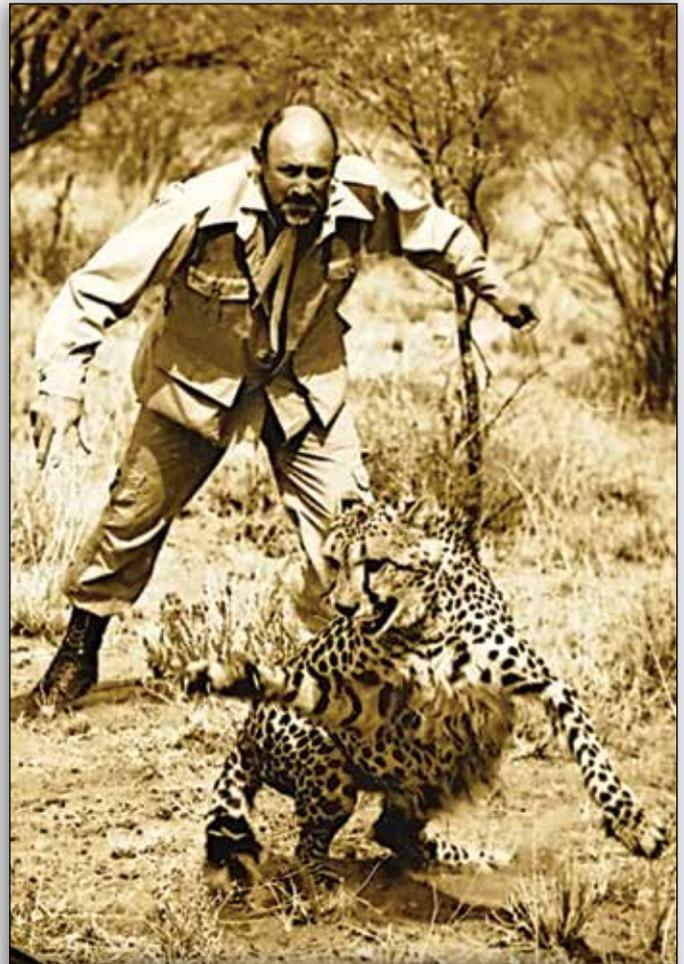
so most of the time they would just walk up and down the fence, looking for a way to get in.

Next Jan got a pack of greyhounds and built special cages on the back of our Land Cruisers so we could hunt with the dogs in the vehicle. If we spotted a cheetah out in the open plains where the springbok roamed, we would release the dogs to go after the predator. If the cheetah was close to thick bush, he could just disappear before the hounds got to him, because they only hunt by sight. However, if the hounds caught sight of a cheetah in a large, open area, they were able to stay with him. Cheetahs are the fastest land animals but they become winded after 300 or 400 yards of running, and then the grey hounds would bay them up and we would come and catch them, usually by throwing a net over their heads. We had to get there quickly because we did not want the dogs hurting the cheetah. We had a large pen in which we kept the captured cheetahs, and eventually we had quite a number of them. We sold them to cheetah conservation projects in Namibia and South Africa.

I had a German client once who was interested in hunting cheetah. It was in March, in the middle of our rainy season – and it was a very wet rainy season! It was a very exciting hunt. We went out early every morning and checked the roads. Usually it would rain until just before dawn, so we could pick up fresh tracks easily. The soil was quite wet, which made it somewhat easier to follow the cheetah spoor. Eventually we would find the spot where a cheetah had run down and caught a springbok and eaten its fill. At first we thought we could just follow the tracks – after all, the cheetah would be sated and would not move far off. Unlike leopards, cheetahs never come back to their kill. Once they have eaten they leave the carcass for the vultures and jackals, and this makes hunting them so difficult.

However, we were never able to catch up with any cheetah. Their sense of sight and sound is too acute, and they always seemed to see us or hear us before we could see them. So we never got the German client's cheetah, but during that hunt we learnt a lot about these predators. We calculated that one cheetah would average two springbok kills a week. This works out to a lot of animals – especially when you've just started and are trying to build up your springbok herd! One of our neighbours started with 50 springbok in a small game area. The next year he had only 10 left – so this shows how much damage they can do to a springbok population.

Twenty years ago I had a client from Belgium, who was very interested in cheetah. It was also in March during the rainy season. We were driving along the boundary fence of a neighbour's cattle ranch when we spotted fresh cheetah tracks. It appeared to be a group of three males, so we got out, picked up the spoor and started following the cheetahs. Then we saw quite a



few vultures circling in the sky ahead of us. It looked as if the cheetahs had made a kill. When we got there, we were astounded to find that the cheetahs had killed a full-grown gemsbok bull!

We continued to follow the cheetahs' tracks, which after a couple of hours led us to a tree with territorial markings. Male cheetahs mark these trees, called "play trees", for territorial recognition. We decided that this was our best bet and we built a blind near the tree.

The next morning at first light the cheetahs were there – three big males! We had a quick shot and downed one of them – a huge male. It scored a number one spot at SCI and held that position for nearly ten years! Over the course of eleven years we took nine cheetahs at that same tree, and every one of them was a very large male. It was amazing how the big males were attracted to that one specific tree. Shooting from a hide near this tree turned out to be the most successful way to hunt these predators.

One day we were loading some cheetahs for export. Between the capture cage containing the cheetah and the transport crate was a small gap. A cheetah broke through this gap and escaped. We had the dogs, the greyhounds, close by so we released them. They chased the cheetah for about half a kilometre and we caught him again.

As we were bringing the cheetah in, one of our workers held it by the tail. We brought up the crate to push the animal into it when the cheetah turned on the worker. Most of the time when you grab a cheetah by the tail, it will try to get away from you, and you can hold it with its head away from you. You can then put a blanket or something over its head to calm it down. This cheetah, however, turned on the worker and tried to bite him. As he pushed the animal's head away, the cheetah snapped off half of his finger! These predators can be extremely dangerous at close quarters.

Today, 45 years later, our game areas have gone from 5 000 ha to 40 000 ha and they are all cheetah-proofed up to 4-foot high, which seems to be working. Our current population of springbok at Mount Etjo is now close to 5 000. One thing that is very interesting is that we never introduced any extra bloodlines from anywhere else into our initial herd of 50 springbok because they were breeding so well.

When we first started hunting them the good springbok trophies were averaging about 14, 14½ up to 15 inches. Then, about six or seven years later, there were some 16-inchers and then one very big 17-incher. As the years progressed, the springbok trophies were getting bigger and bigger. Eventually, about 40 years on, our PH Rudi de Klerk and a client shot the new SCI





number one – a huge 19-inch, with massive 7½-inch bases. There were other springbok that were shot with longer horns, but the combined mass and length of this one is the current SCI number one.

Not introducing new blood is a contentious subject. Many people think you have to keep bringing in new blood to get big trophies. Despite not introducing any new blood into our herd since 1975 till now, these huge springbok just kept appearing. This shows how deep the gene pool is.

During the off-season we have an on-going culling programme to keep the springbok numbers down. There isn't a big demand for live sales, and the meat gets utilised in our eco-tourist lodge or hunting lodge, and sales to supermarkets, and so on. I personally do most of the culling, using my son's Seiko .243 with the 5x25 Swarovski on top. It is an extremely accurate rifle and ideal for head-shooting the springbok because that is what you need when selling the meat.

One day when going out, I did not take the Seiko with me. Instead I had a semi-automatic .223 Heckler & Koch with a six-power scope. Because it was a semi-automatic, the trigger was quite hard and couldn't be adjusted, so I wasn't really keen on using it for headshots. However, it was the only rifle I had with me. I got a call that some springbok meat was needed and so, when I spotted a youngish female, I took aim, pulled the trigger and she went down. By the way she dropped I knew the shot wasn't true, so I rushed up to her, jumped out and grabbed her as she started to get up. The animal was just stunned. I held her down with one hand, and got out my knife with the other to sever her spine to kill her quickly. However, she kicked out wildly with her hind foot and cut the back of my hand, with a whole flap of skin coming loose. I didn't want the springbok to get away but as I saw the blood rushing out, I quickly despatched her.

I threw the carcass on the bakkie, radioed the camp and told Alex that my hand had been torn open by the springbok. I still had full use of my hand, however, so there was no damage to the tendons and nerves, and I drove back. At the camp, Alex treated the injury with a solution of Betadine, and then we went to the hospital in Otjiwarongo, where the doctor closed the wound with about ten stitches. It was quite a big wound to be caused by such a small animal but it just shows you anything in the bush can be dangerous on any given day. **ASM**

