

New Mexico Safari for the 10 Yard Oryx

By Jim Schwietert

Having read most of Peter Hathaway Capstick's classic stories about hunting in Africa, I've always believed that the only great trackers on this earth were those black fellows in Africa. I've now changed my mind. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

This story begins a few years ago when I discovered the opportunity for hunting Oryx on the White Sands Missile Range from reading *Huntin' Fool*. Oryx are large African Antelope with gorgeous long black ribbed horns reaching 30 to 40 inches. As in the Kalihari desert where it is known as a Gemsbok, the Oryx has thrived in the arid desert of the Missile Range. Their spectacular horns, vivid markings, delicious meat and their size being equal to a cow elk make them a highly desirable trophy.

Last year, I noticed in the *Huntin' Fool's* Hunt Finder that an outfitter in New Mexico offered Oryx hunts with guaranteed tags. With a call to Jeff Warren at *Huntin' Fool*, I had Matt Gilstrap's name and phone number. Matt was very honest and forthright on the phone saying that success was not guaranteed but 80% still sounded good. I booked a hunt for early April 2011.

After driving from my home in Colorado to South Central New Mexico, I met up with Matt at a local motel. I found this lean rancher/cowboy to be very friendly and unpretentious. We hit it off from the start.

Early the next morning, we drove to the hunt area, a large ranch situated near the White Sands Missile Range. Matt stated that a steady supply of Oryx migrate off the Missile Range unto private land. As dawn broke, we drove down a sandy ranch road looking for either an Oryx or tracks crossing the road. Limited visibility due to mesquite brush and sand dunes certainly added to the challenge. Matt soon found fresh Oryx tracks crossing the road. He then blew my mind by declaring that he gets 50% of his Oryx by tracking them down! Soon, he found a set of large tracks he liked and we set out on foot. This again reminded me of stories of African hunts for elephant and buffalo where trackers locate trails crossing dirt roads and follow them into the bush. Matt's long legs rapidly crossed the desert floor while I managed to keep up. The height of the brush covered sand dunes made my bipod worthless but Matt carried a long tripod rifle rest just like an African professional hunter. More shades of Africa. We followed the tracks a half mile to a windmill water source where the long heart shaped Oryx tracks disappeared into the cattle tracks. I watched the water trough from a discrete distance while Matt retrieved his truck.

About 11am, while driving another ranch road, Matt spotted our first Oryx on the side of a hill about a third of a mile away. With our binocs we could see the tall black spires on the bull's head Matt pronounced him to be a shooter. But the spooky fellow spotted us at the same time and trotted up the hill, over the top and disappeared in the brush. I thought to myself "Well, that one is gone, time to find another". However, Matt had other ideas and quietly declared "I'm going to get on him". I thought to myself that at least I would get some good exercise out of this.

We quickly crossed the desert floor to the foot of the hill and climbed to the top. It didn't take Matt long to find the bull's tracks among many other Oryx tracks along the hillside. Matt realized this bull had made those tracks BEFORE he spotted us. He soon found the tracks coming back up the hill and he pointed out the long stride of the tracks as well as the sand kicked up by the trotting bull. Now, he was "on him". Matt continued to follow the bull's trail among yucca, mesquite and sand dunes for several hundred yards. He quietly pointed out how the stride shortened as the bull slowed. Eventually, the stride was less than a body length as the bull now ambled along. Talk about excitement, tracking a big bull Oryx that we had just spotted not 30 minutes ago and knowing you are gaining ground on him put my heart in my throat. After more tracking, Matt pointed to where the bull began to walk in small circles on the shady side of tall yucca. "looking for a resting spot" Matt explained in a whisper. "He's in trouble now." At this point, Matt asked me to quietly put a round in the chamber. Since my rifle is slung over my shoulder pointing straight up, this was safe. Matt's stride decreased with the bull's stride and he now glided silently between brush covered dunes. When we first started tracking the bull Matt had instructed me to keep my eyes focused out in front of us as we might just walk right up on him.

Suddenly, he stopped and turned his head to me and whispered "He's only 10 yards ahead of us." I know my mouth dropped open and my eyes probably got as big as saucers. I peered ahead and couldn't see a thing at first. Then by looking directly through the black mesquite bush in front of us, I could see two long black daggers pointing skyward and they were moving!!! Sunlight glinted the tips. I slipped my safety off and moved to my right to find a shooting lane around the thick mesquite. As the bull came slowly into view, I realized that he was also moving to my right and he was looking straight at me!!! I was now afraid to move all the way to where I was clear of the big bush, so I found a 6 inch window through the right side of the bush. I raised my 30-378 Weatherby Magnum, a bona fide thousand yard rifle and killed him at 10 yards.

As we approached the fallen bull, I experienced those mixed feelings that only hunters understand. The excitement, thrill and ecstasy of a great hunt was tempered with sorrow for the death of one of the most beautiful animals I had ever seen. Matt congratulated me on my kill but I knew who deserved all the credit and I told him so. In my 35 years of hunting big game, I'd never witnessed a tracking job like this one. According to Matt's GPS, the kill site was 1.3 miles away from the truck (as the crow flies). A quick mental computation showed that Matt had tracked him over a mile. By now, I was in awe of this cowboy/rancher/outfitter. Needless to say, I'll be hunting with Matt again. Maybe one of his Elk hunts or maybe one of his horseback lion hunts in the Gila Wilderness near his ranch.

See you soon, Bwana.