

ELEPHANT WHISPERER
BY
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We’d been working the herd for nearly an hour, trying to get a shot. They had never winded us, but they knew something was wrong, and they were feeding along slowly, mostly listening and lifting their trunks to test the air. In open mopane they would have spooked long before, but we were in the Zambezi Valley’s legendary jess, that thick, nasty tangle almost impossible to hunt in. For most of that hour, we had been within twenty yards, and able to only hear the elephants’ soft rumbling and branches breaking as they fed, occasionally glimpsing a tall gray battleship above the forbidding mess.

For some of that hour we had been within ten yards. Close enough to know which one we wanted to shoot, but no hope of a safe shot. I had a tuskless permit, a good thing to have in this Valley area, which has too many elephants and a strong tuskless gene. We had spotted the herd feeding up from the Zambezi in open mopane, and at a distance professional hunter Ivan Carter spotted a big, old tuskless cow without a calf. Game on!

By the time we closed they had crossed the narrow belt of mopane and entered the deadly jess. We had glimpsed our intended target several times, but either there was no shot or other elephants were too close and too dangerous. In a herd, the hard part is to take the elephant you want without having to shoot your way in or out. A second tuskless cow complicated this because she had a young calf at heel. We caught a glimpse of her head and approached her once, then backed off very carefully when we saw that small gray form between her massive feet.

Now we were at an impasse. The elephant knew we were there, but they were supremely confident in the thick cover. We almost waved off, but with the wind still stable, Ivan suggested we give it one more try by circling around ahead of the herd. Then it got simple. The herd was feeding along an unseen elephant path, and all we had to do was walk quietly along that path right into the middle of them. The one we wanted, not only tuskless, but also big-bodied and old with sunken withers and ribs showing, was feeding straight toward us at ten yards. Perfect, except, on the right side of the path, halfway between us and the elephant we wanted, stood another elephant with calf at heel.

We stood frozen for a long time, the elephant listening and feeding, and then the cow and her calf faded off into the jess, leaving us a clear, safe shot at the old tuskless elephant we wanted. I raised my rifle – and was stopped by Ivan. First he gently tugged on my sleeve, then he forcibly pulled me forward. “We’re clear. Now let’s get close,” he whispered.

Confidence Incarnate

Ivan Carter was born a Rhodesian, too late to be involved in the long bush war that concluded with his native land becoming Zimbabwe, but his timing was perfect to become a part of the safari industry that sprang up and grew rapidly in the peaceful postwar years. As a teenager, while his chums were playing sports and chasing girls, Carter was off in the bush hunting “PAC” (Problem Animal Control) elephant and buffalo and learning what would become his trade. As a young man he served his apprenticeship and earned a Zimbabwe professional hunter’s license.

In some countries a “PH license” means little, but no country in Africa has more rigid standards of apprenticeship and testing than Zimbabwe. Most hunters with extensive African experience regard Zimbabwe PHs collectively as Africa’s finest today. In my own experience, as far as the basics of his trade are concerned, Ivan Carter is at least as good as his peers (which is saying quite a lot). One difference is that, during his early years, he came to genuinely love elephants first and foremost. As a professional hunter he hunts competently the full range of Zimbabwe species, but he specializes in elephants. Another difference is that, in addition to hunting, he has extensive experience as a national parks guide for photographic tourism. So he has studied elephants for the sake of studying them and filming them, not just from the standpoint of selecting a proper trophy and stalking it.

Life in Zimbabwe has not been all roses in recent years. His family farm was lost in the land reallocation, and today Carter and his wife live in the United States. He still does a full season in Zimbabwe and other African countries, and he has lectured widely on elephant behavior and management at such prestigious venues as Stanford University.

My filming partners and I were looking for serious elephant expertise as we prepared to start taping elephants as part of an ongoing series of African hunting DVDs. Good Zimbabwe professional hunters that we know and respect, such as Paul Smith and Andrew Dawson, universally told us we needed to spend some time with Ivan Carter. They were right. I have never been around anyone who possessed such in-depth knowledge of a single species, or that level of confidence in the presence of unquestionably dangerous game.

Carter believes that he understands elephants’ body language – in the short time I’ve known him, I have seen him do amazing things. Last year he was guiding a hunter on an elephant safari in the Zambezi Valley, and I was along for the ride. We got onto a youngish bull in some really thick cover, and we were awfully close before we got a proper look at the ivory (or lack thereof) Carter was dead calm, rifle at ease, when he said, “He’s going to charge, but it’s a demonstration. He will stop right there.” Indicating a bush a few yards away.

Trumpeting and flapping his ears, the bull came....and stopped about where Carter said he would, then retreated a few yards, still trumpeting.

“Now he’ll come again, but it’s still a demonstration, and he’ll stop a bit closer, and then he will leave.” This happened too, and then he was gone, leaving us looking at each other and shaking our heads.

Method Or Madness?

Was this insanity or insight? Viewed logically, what choice was there? Absent any other course of action, it’s never a good idea to run from a dangerous animal in thick cover. It’s a worse idea to shoot unnecessarily. Carter knew this elephant wasn’t serious. With his trumpeting and outstretched ears this wasn’t hard to figure. Exactly how he predicted with perfect accuracy the exact sequence of events is beyond me, but he knew what this elephant was going to do.

Some of his peers regard him as crazy. He does indeed work closer to elephants than anyone I’ve ever seen, but he does it selectively with logic in his movements. In national parks, where some of the photos that accompany this story were taken, elephants are relatively undisturbed and calm – and probably understand they are safe. Under such conditions, Carter gets very, very close. Elephants seem to know when they’re in a hunting area and vulnerable, and Carter gives them more space.

In herds he is more careful yet. Although he loves elephants, he is a hunter in a country grossly overpopulated with elephants, and he understands the imperative to hunt them. When an elephant is to be taken, Ivan Carter's real specialty is getting close. In a herd, whether a bull herd or a cow herd, the hardest part is isolating the intended target. When we were trying to isolate my tuskless elephant, we spent many tense minutes very close to the herd but took no unusual chances. In any case, we had the rifles, so it wasn't we who were in danger; the great risk lay in taking an elephant we didn't want to shoot, and Carter was exceptionally careful to make sure this didn't happen.

Once a shootable elephant is identified, in a situation where a shot can be made, all bets are off and Carter likes to get close. Another hunter, Jim Hall, also had a tuskless permit, and he took his early in the hunt, frontally, at perhaps eight yards. It took more time to find me a tuskless elephant, and more time yet to find Hall a good bull. Before these things happened we got very close to quite a few elephants. To define that, Carter considers much beyond ten yards a long shot on elephant!

This does indeed sound insane. Carter and I talked about it quite a bit (before, during and after) in various practical applications. There are three reasons why, once an elephant has been selected, he likes to get very close. First, he genuinely loves elephants, and he wants them taken cleanly, preferably with a brain shot so the elephant is dead before it hears the report of the rifle. A brain shot must be very precise, and a frontal brain shot is truly one of the most difficult shots in the hunting world. Carter believes the only way to do it effectively is to get very, very close. Second, recognizing that the brain shot is difficult, sometimes it's going to be screwed up. The farther away you are, the more difficult an instantaneous follow-up becomes and the greater the chance for a lost elephant. The closer you are, the better your chances to correct an initial error.

Finally, Carter is one of relatively few professional hunters who truly understands that his primary service to his clients isn't just showing them good trophies, but providing an experience that will yield a lifetime of memories. In southern Africa in the new millennium, Carter understands that he cannot show his clients the 100-pound tusks of yesteryear, and the reality is that in some areas at certain times of the year even a fifty-pounder may be unlikely. While he can't guarantee heavy ivory, he can work overtime to provide a memorable experience. *Oh, yeah.*

Getting Close

So, with me thinking I had a perfect shot at ten or maybe eleven yards suddenly I was being propelled down the elephant trail toward our old tuskless cow. We stopped at four yards and I raised the rifle. At this range the elephant seemed to tower above us, and it was the first time I have been so close that I was aware of having the rifle at a steep uphill angle.

The elephant was apparently more horrified than I was, because she threw her head up and backed up a step before I took the shot. We had already proven Carter's third premise: I will never forget our little charge down that elephant path! Now we would prove the first: No matter how close, you can still screw it up. I failed to take into account the elephant's upraised head, and my first shot was too high.

You know about old Pondero Taylor's Knock-Out Values, right? A near miss to the brain will still drop an elephant, at least for a moment? I haven't seen that very often, and although this elephant took a 500-grain solid – fully 5,000 foot-pounds of energy – squarely between the eyes, I didn't see it this time. The good news is that when a brain shot fails, you recognize it instantly, even while still in recoil, and your own brain flashes that you must do something very quickly.

And so it was now my job (before it became Carter's job) to exercise his second promise and try to clean things up with my second barrel. The elephant was instantly in motion, head back down, turning to our right, but the Rigby .450 was in motion as well, and at five yards it really was quite simple. As the head came around, the front bead found the ear hole, and the elephant was down.

A couple of days later we found the kind of track we'd been seeking for Jim Hall, a single big-footed bull apparently trailing a small herd of cows. We followed on tough ground for a couple of hours, and we were getting close when the trackers lost the spoor. They spread out and cast, and one of them glimpsed the bull feeding along ahead of us, confirming good ivory.

Carter circled a bit to get the wind exactly right, and they moved in cautiously on the elephant's flank. I saw it not as bravado or derring-do, but efficiency and certainty. At ten yards they stopped, and it was obvious the elephant had heard or sensed something. He had been feeding, but now he was dead still. He might have turned to face them, or he might have run. He did neither, because Hall shot him precisely at the base of his ear hole, and the elephant collapsed without hearing the shot.

I will be doing more elephant hunting with Ivan Carter because I now realize I have so much more to learn.
