

Early Season is interesting

The Green Valley

By Craig Boddington

As anyone who has been there knows, Africa is a captivating place-and one of the spells she casts is the compulsion for those of us who have been there to generalize- especially to those of us who have not been there. Africa is a huge continent. No two areas are alike-and even within a given area the conditions change with the seasons. Yes, Africa has seasons, but they are driven more by cycle of rains than by our concept of spring, summer, fall and winter.

In southern Africa the common generalization is the peak hunting months are June, July and August-their winter or, more properly, the middle of the dry season. Then we extrapolate that May is okay, but still a bit green. September is great, getting hotter, but with surface water limited. April is very green, depending on when the rains end. October is very hot, but if you can handle it the game is concentrated around the last water sources. Hopefully the rains start again in November, with the "wet season" continuing in varying intensity until March.

In Zimbabwe a lot of crops ripen in March, so although it's warm, green, often wet, and mobility can be an issue, but because of crop raiding that's a great time to hunt elephants. And there I go with a great generalization. I've never been in Zimbabwe in March, so I'm just repeating what I've been told. Hunting crop raiders is a special situation.

Under the heading of generalizations, we consider there are tradeoffs between early, mid-season, and late season hunting. Early, hunting conditions can be difficult because the foliage is thick and the roads can be really bad. The advantage is the game has been undisturbed for several months. Peak season is just that, when conditions are "normal" (whatever that means) and the weather is glorious. Late season is very hot and many good trophies have been taken, but the game is concentrated around available water.

What does all this mean? I reflected on this in mid-April, 2009, as our charter plane swept over the Zambezi Valley enroute to Chewore North. I have been in the Valley from May onwards, but I had never been there in April. So until now all this business about early hunting was just hearsay. As I looked down about all I could see was an ocean of green. Our outfitter Chifuti Safaris' Andrew Dawson had said that it had been a "late rainy season" – which is the luck of the draw when you plan a hunt outside the peak months. He said further that it was "very green," and impassable rivers had delayed their roadwork. Yep, it sure looked green- and as we flew over there was clearly a lot of water still flowing down the major watercourses.

The first part of the trip I joined PH Ivan Carter and client Bill Jones for an elephant hunt. We had no real problems with mobility, but several days were more cloudy than sunny- and we got a couple of serious late rainstorms. Mostly, well, it sure was green. Some days I felt more like I was in Cameroon than Zimbabwe, but the effect depended on what we were hunting. With water, grass, and browse everywhere we saw very little sign of buffalo and plains game. Cat hunting is very good this time of year because prey is widely scattered and hunting is as difficult for them as it is for us. Other hunters in other camps took both lion and leopard while we were there, and fairly easily.

We were there for elephants, and the elephant hunting was spectacular. The elephants were indeed undisturbed, and with plenty of water they weren't moving very far. We followed elephants everyday and we saw bulls everyday. I think we waved off on just one track, which is a great tribute to Ivan's tracking team- and I think the longest we ever followed an elephant before making contact was about three hours. In the Valley that is miraculous. Bill Jones took his bull on the ninth day, and it was the 25th bull we looked at. For elephant hunting in the Zambezi Valley that is also excellent.

We got very close to a whole bunch of those bulls, which is Ivan Carter's specialty. The bull we took was a nice Valley bull, but we're pretty sure it wasn't the biggest one. On about the fifth day we caught just one glimpse of a bull that looked longer and heavier, but it was so thick we just couldn't close, and eventually we spooked that one and never saw his track again. Tuskless elephants were also on the menu, and there are lots of tuskless ones in Chewore North. Of course, the tuskless cows are always tucked into a heard. We took one apiece, and in the thick green stuff sorting them out of their herds was difficult, dangerous, and plenty exciting.

With Bill's bull secured, he and Ivan went on to Dande North, where conditions were a bit more favorable for buffalo. I went up to Chewore South and joined Steve Hornady, who was hunting buffalo with Andrew Dawson. Honest, I'm of two minds on this early buffalo hunting. The herds are undisturbed, and since the primary mating season is coming on most herds will hold mature bulls.

The problem is locating those bulls in the herds and getting a shot. It's a lot different with elephants. In most cases we needed to close within ten yards to get a good look at the ivory, but if you get the wind right you can do that with an elephant, especially when you're tracking just a couple of bulls. It's difficult to get that close to a buffalo and almost impossible with big herds, but once you get close an elephant stands above a lot of the brush. Buffaloes are still hidden behind the wall of green. I spent a couple of days with Hornady when we were, literally, into buffaloes all day long. We heard them, smelled them, saw the bushes move, and occasionally caught glimpses of black animals. We never managed to judge a mature bull, let alone take a shot.

Early, when it's green, you can find buffaloes, and because there is so much water and grass they don't move far. You can, and we did, take day-old tracks and catch up within a few hours. And you can stay with them all day, because they're very secure in the thick stuff and they don't run far. Hornady finally got his buffalo after eight tough days.

It depends on your luck. The herds have not been hunted, and on any given day fortune can smile. My friend John Astle, retired Marine Colonel, Maryland state senator, former SCI State Legislator of the Year, was in camp with Hornady hunting elephant and buffalo. After Bill Jones got his buffalo my intention was to get up there and hunt with him a few days as well as with Hornady. This was not to be. Astle shot a beautiful, long tusked elephant bull on his second day –and a couple of days later he took a fantastic buffalo. Despite the thick, green cover, with both animals he had clear shots in the open. By the time I got into camp it was all over, but he did the right thing. I wouldn't have passed either animal. Especially knowing what I now know about hunting early when it's thick and green.