

The Eastern Cape –

Revisited

By Jeff Belongia

A return to South Africa's Eastern Cape was inevitable – the idea already firmly planted in my mind since my first visit in 1985.

Africa, in general, has a wonderful yet strange control over the soul, and many writers have tried to express the reasoning behind it. I note this captivation and recognize the allure, and am too weak to resist. For me, Africa is what dreams are made of – and I dream of it daily.

Dr. Martin Luther King was wise when he chose the phrase, “I have a dream.” He could have said, “I have a strategic plan.” Not quite the same effect! People follow their dreams. As parents we should spend more time teaching our children to dream, and to dream *big*. There is no Standard Operating Procedure to get through the tough times in life. Strength and discipline are measured by the depth and breadth of our dreams and not by strategic planning!

The Catholic nuns at Saint Peter's grade school first noted my talents. And they all told me to stop daydreaming. But I've never been able to totally conquer that urge – I dream continually of the romance of Africa, including the Eastern Cape.

The Eastern Cape is a special place with a wide variety of antelope – especially those ‘pygmy’ species found nowhere else on the continent: Cape grysbok, blue duiker, Vaal rhebok, steenbok, grey duiker, suni, and oribi. Still not impressed? Add Cape bushbuck, mountain reedbuck, blesbok, nyala, bontebok, three colour phases of the Cape springbok, and great hunting for small cats such as caracal and serval.

For larger game there are copious numbers of Cape kudu, Cape eland, oryx, Burchell's zebra, both black and blue wildebeest, and Cape red hartebeest. There's also red lechwe, waterbuck, and giraffe – plenty to capture any hunter's imagination.

With great anticipation, I returned to the Eastern Cape in 2008 to hunt with PH Owen Smith of Jimbah Safaris, a wonderful person and an excellent hunter and guide. My mother had a saying: “Anticipation is better than realization.” I'm not sure if it's *better*, but it does add value. I took full advantage of her belief: I booked my 2008 safari in 2005 and had nearly three years to anticipate. Not that I was away from Africa during that time – I chased other dreams in Zambia and Namibia.

The Eastern Cape Province is as rich in history as it is in game species, and there are monuments, battlefields, and museums to explore. The Boer and the British fought many battles against each other and against the local Xhosa people. Some farms have been in the same family for seven generations, so one still finds the rich, steadfast traditions of the Afrikaner.



The Eastern Cape is full of local history, such as these guard towers that were built during the Anglo-Boer wars to protect railroad tracks and bridges.

Unlike much of the hunting in South Africa, the Eastern Cape is still mostly free of game fencing. All the species I collected were taken on totally free-range areas.

On my first trip to this province I took a Vaal rhebok. In *African Hunter II*, Craig Boddington refers to the Vaal rhebok as one of the greatest big-game trophies in all Africa. (Coincidentally, he and I hunted with the same PH on the same ranch.)

But the real focus of that safari was the diminutive oribi, that five-letter word in crossword puzzles to the clue 'African Antelope.' Oribi look a bit like steenbok on steroids. They weigh approximately 35 pounds, are fawn in colour with a lot of white on the belly. Those in South Africa differ slightly from the ones in Zambia in that the backside of the tail is black. Like the steenbok, five inches of horn is very good, and six inches is *really* good. Oribi in South Africa are on a permit system and require an application one year in advance. My outfitter had required a US\$1,000 deposit on the trophy fee with the balance of \$950 due upon collecting (or wounding) one. This made oribi the most expensive trophy, pound for pound, I'd ever collected.

This time, the tiny-horned Cape grysbok held my interest. This easily concealed species is smaller than the oribi. Its striking pelage is red with cream-coloured salting throughout the hide. The shape of

its head reminds me of a klipspringer. The horns of a record-book grysbok must measure 1-7/8 inches.



After missing a potential Top Five SCI mountain reedbuck - twice at 80 yards - Belongia took his trophy animal, with a little help from his friend, Spicky - the Jack Russell Terrier.

There was no need for a .375 H&H on this safari. I decided to use my Sako-actioned, Kreiger-barrelled, 7mm-08 Remington. This rifle puts three 145-grain Speer boattail bullets into a 3/4 inch group at 200 yards. The chronographed velocity is 2924 fps. The way I shoot I need all the help my equipment can provide!

In addition I wanted two chocolate-coloured Cape bushbuck to add to the Limpopo bushbuck and Chobe bushbuck I'd collected on previous hunts.

If anything else in the way of antelope caught my eye, I felt the rifle/bullet combination would be satisfactory, assuming I did my part. I must confess that I didn't practise enough with shooting sticks prior to the hunt. This was obvious – and ego-deflating – when I missed – twice – the neck of a mountain reedbuck that would place in the top five in the SCI Trophy Record Book at a distance of 80 yards.

The reedbuck was lying under and behind a bush facing away from me. No excuses. Incredulous at the second missed shot, I took my eye off the buck to look at my PH as he instructed me to shoot the 'he-is-up-and-standing-to-the-left-of-the-tree' ram. I knew this ram was mine as I shot offhand, placing the bullet behind the last rib and up into the chest cavity.

"You missed again," stated my frustrated PH.

"I know I hit him. I saw him fall, through the scope," I said.

I stoked three new cartridges into the magazine, and we headed up the steep hillside to where the ram had been lying. We couldn't find it – or a drop of blood. The PH informed me that he'd had a hunter the previous season who'd missed the same ram at 100 metres. This reedbuck had magic! Still, I was incredibly upset with my performance, even after the female reedbuck I'd executed precisely with a shot behind the last rib.

While hunting Africa is the ultimate high for the big-game hunter, having friends to hunt with only enriches the experience. So I asked a couple of friends to join me for this safari. Dan Gorecki and Tony Berndt agreed, as long as we limited our communal time in camp and not tell our guides we'd hunted together on previous occasions. In fact, Dan and Tony made me fly to Africa a few days early so as not to give their families cause for concern over any disruptive influence I might have on their esteemed characters.



Riana Smith was the hunters' "life-blood cook and true boss of the safari - also affectionately known as 'Grumpy'."

I arrived in Joburg and spent the night with a longtime friend, Peter Derichs.

He's a great naturalist and author of a best-selling guidebook to the Kagalagadi Transfrontier Park, now producing an extensive work on the Kruger National Park. I relaxed by the pool while Peter made a *braai* and recounted his days collecting photos and their corresponding GPS coordinates for his new book. Even without the delicious South African wines, laughter comes easily when the two of us share some time. All of my safaris are better if I start them out with Derichs.



Belongia spent the first days of his safari with the Indian Ocean as a backdrop for his hunt for oribi, duiker, grysbok, and this nice Cape bushbuck.

The following day we'd driven toward Kimberly to meet my old PH friend, Chris Owen, with whom I'd done my first three hunts in Zimbabwe in the early 1980s. Chris had been the chief game ranger in the famed Tuli Block of south-western Southern Rhodesia before the country became Zimbabwe in 1980. Chris offered to drive me the nine hours to Port Alfred; I accepted on the condition that he stay a few days as my guest hunting in the Eastern Cape. He agreed.

PH Owen Smith knows the Eastern Cape and its landowners very well; he spent his youth hunting the same haunts that we'd explore on my hunt.

We spent the first three days hunting for oribi, Cape bushbuck, duiker and grysbok on the dunes along the coast of the Indian Ocean just south of Port Alfred. The venue provided a most beautiful backdrop for our hunt. Success came quickly as we collected record-book specimens of all four species by the third morning. We received word via cellphone that Tony and Dan had taken Cape kudu, klipspringer and bushbuck in an area to the west of our position.

Our plan was for each group to relocate to the Bedford/Cradock area of the Eastern Cape for the remainder of the hunt to pursue Vaal rhebok, blesbok, mountain reedbuck, nyala, and the three colour phases of the Cape springbok. All together, by the end of the hunt we'd collected 29 trophy animals.

Evenings always found us sharing stories of the day's events over dinner on the veranda of a beautiful 1850s Cape Dutch home. Laughter mingled with the sweet smoke from blue gum wood burning in the huge fireplace on the end of the veranda. I thought of dreams shared, not only by those present but also of those who'd come long before us – the families who'd shared this home, and of the first Huguenots who, in their escape from religious persecution in Europe, had thought to bring grapevine roots to start a new wine culture in a far-off land. Perhaps it helped them remember their own roots and those they'd left behind. Perhaps they symbolized a new beginning.

I also thought of the dreams of Chris Owen's ancestors who'd left England for colonial Kenya, whose descendants never envisioned being uprooted by Jomo Kenyatta and independence. Chris's parents carried those dreams on to Rhodesia only to be uprooted again, this time to South Africa. Dreams sustained them all through difficult times.

My boyhood dreams of adventure had brought me to this time and place. I'd wanted to taste, smell, and feel them once again. Now, here we were together, sharing an experience we'll revisit in our mind's eye for many years to come.

Jeff Belongia is an investment banker in the public finance arena living in Wisconsin with his wife, Betsy. When not writing cheques for college tuition for his two sons, Ryan and Trevor, Belongia advises municipal clients on financial and economic development issues. Dreaming of Africa takes up the balance of his time.

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