

Jagdzeit

Hunter's Path

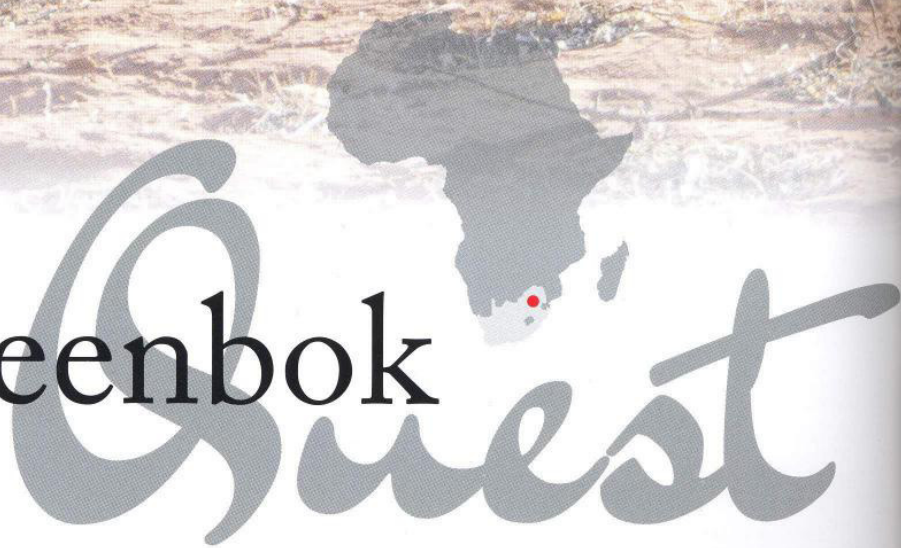


Time to act fast. Steenbok are incredibly elusive and can vanish in a matter of seconds. Photo: Bernd Kamphuis



South Africa: Steenbok

My Steenbok



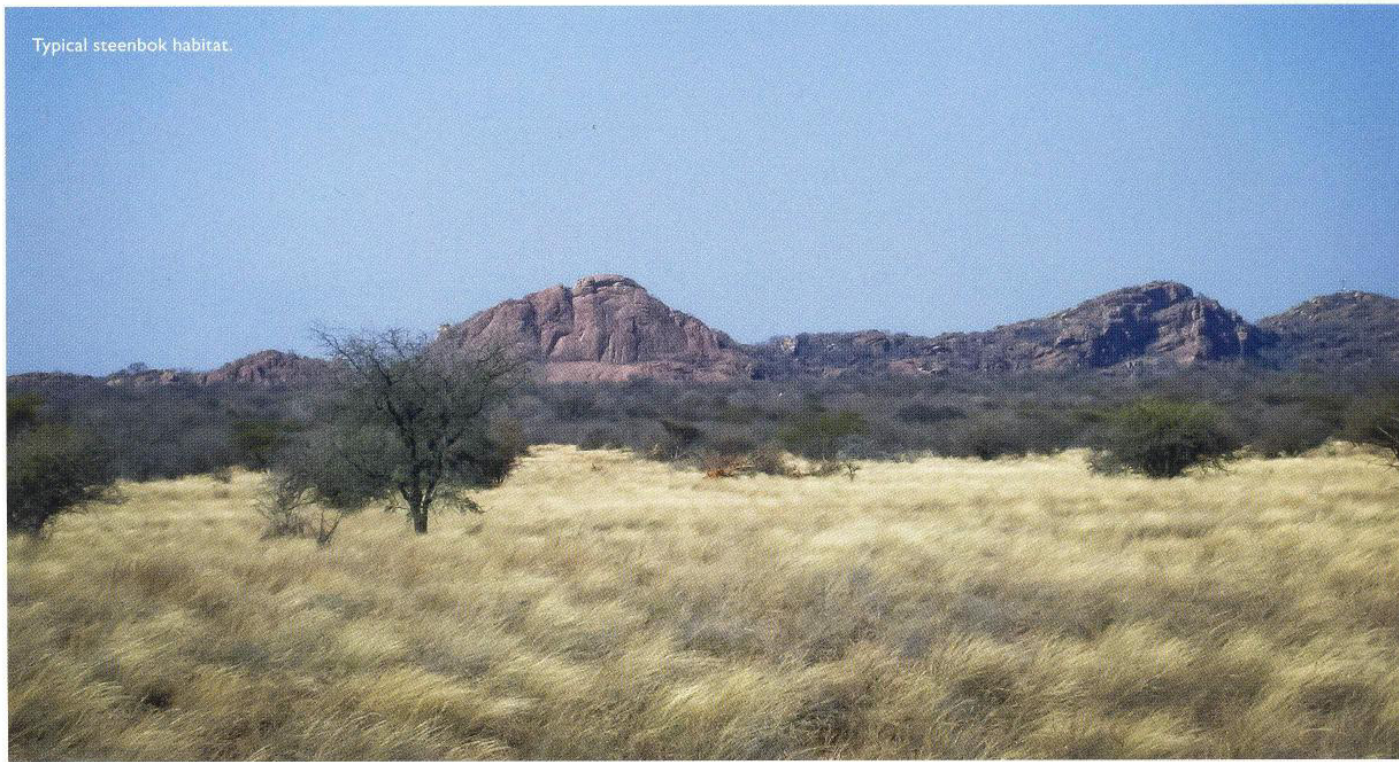
Text and Photos: Frank Berbuir

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH A STEENBOK was in northern Namibia in 2004. It was on the second day of a hunt when my professional hunter, Gustav, suddenly spotted the beautiful tiny antelope. We observed the steenbok closely, admiring its huge radar-bowl-like ears, graceful slight-built body, and light brown coat. It had big brown eyes that stared back at us. Gustav was so enamored with the beauty of this little fellow that we debated about shooting it until it was too late, and the steenbok disappeared. I knew however that I wanted to take a steenbok, and wouldn't hesitate at my next opportunity.

Steenbok are quite common in southern Africa, but not easy to locate. They are small and not totally dependent on drinking water, gaining the moisture they need from their food sources. As one of the smallest African antelope, steenbok (*Raphicerus campestris*) measure between forty-five and sixty centimeters at the shoulder and weigh about fifteen kilograms. Their coat varies in

in the burning midday November sun, he stopped and pointed to a beautiful buck resting in the shade of a small bush. The bokkie was relaxing approximately thirty meters from us. I was anxious to take a shot, but hesitated because I was also a bit reluctant to shoot a bedded animal. We moved a step forward hoping the steenbok would stand up, when it jumped up and vanished within a split second. It had taken me four trips to Africa for a second chance at a steenbok and my opportunity was blown in a second. That was the last time I saw a steenbok, even though I have hunted southern Africa every year since then.

In August 2014 I was once again in beautiful South Africa to hunt with my friend and professional hunter Izak Vos of Vos Safaris. I wanted a steenbok more than ever. This little antelope was becoming almost an obsession, and proving just how difficult it might be to attempt to complete the 'Tiny Ten' with bow and arrow. Izak had mentioned that he knew an interesting place in



Typical steenbok habitat.

shade from fawn to rufous, is typically rather orange, and blends in appropriately in their habitat. Their underside, including chin and throat, is white, as is the ring around their eyes. Steenbok ears are large with black markings on the inside that are sometimes called 'finger-marks'. Males have straight, smooth, parallel horns seven to nineteen centimeters in length.

I hunted in southern Africa in 2005 and 2006 but I never saw a steenbok, even though I actually tried to hunt for them. In 2007 I was in Namibia in the Khomas Highlands and was again looking explicitly for a steenbok. My tracker on that hunt was extremely experienced. Like the skilled predator he was, one day he found fresh tracks and followed them. After a three-hour stalk

the Limpopo Province not far from the Botswana border where we could hopefully find my long-sought-after quarry. After my arrival at the Johannesburg airport, and the nice welcome from Izak, we enjoyed a good talk while driving, and made ambitious plans for the following eight days of hunting. We reminisced about our successful bowhunt for a huge Cape Buffalo and for other animals the year earlier. My other most desired species on this trip was a Cape Eland. The difference between the two animals couldn't be more extreme. An eland, with a shoulder height of about 1.6 meters and a weight up to a ton is quite a different animal, sort of like a tank compared to a bicycle. Because of this I decided to carry my reliable Elite GT 500 bow, set at ninety-pound draw



weight, with the Easton Full Metal Jacket 250 Dangerous Game arrows, tipped with Muzzy Phantom SS 200 grain broadheads. Certainly, the combination was a bit much for a steenbok, but I felt most comfortable with it, and any set-up that was capable of bringing down an eland would certainly do the job on the dainty steenbok. My shooting had been fantastic in the months leading up to the hunt. Never change a winning formula.

The first day at our destination we scouted for game animals by glassing and stalking, as well as by driving within the area. The terrain contained a few rock outcroppings and some small hills, but was mainly flat bushveldt with open plains, savannah or grasslands, peppered with thorny bushes and some acacias. For stalking with bow and arrow it would be really challenging to get close to game. Izak however had definitely not exaggerated about the abundance of steenbok. On the first day we saw about a dozen, including some really good trophy bucks, along with numerous impala, warthogs, blesbok, kudu and blue wildebeest. We also spooked a pair of bat-eared-foxes just twenty meters in front of us. It was the first time I had ever seen the small canids.

Toward evening we arrived at a large grassy plain and spotted a big male steenbok with really long horns about one hundred twenty meters away. Izak estimated the horns to be close to six inches. It was a very impressive specimen. He stood facing us for quite a while before bounding off in a zigzag escape pattern and

suddenly disappearing in the high grass. This behavior is what makes steenbok so difficult to hunt. At the first sign of trouble they take a few steps and disappear into the vegetation by lying down. "That's the one we will go for. He will stay in the area. They are territorial animals and there is a fair chance to get in close and make a stalk early tomorrow morning," Izak said with confidence.

Back in our hunting camp that evening we marveled at the impressions from the day and made plans for the following morning, while dining on tasty springbok ribs from the grill. Our accommodation was a rustic self-catering hunting camp in a hundred-year-old former farmhouse that certainly wasn't luxurious, but that had its own special charm. It was just the two of us camping out. We didn't have any electricity and used old gas lanterns for lighting after dark. Hot water was boiled in a water kettle on the same fire where we did all of our cooking, which turned out to be a primitive sort of barbecue. We both tremendously enjoyed the old Africa flavor that this added to the hunt.

Early the next morning at sunrise, after a quick coffee and biscuit, we walked to the area where we had spotted the steenbok. Glassing very carefully as we went along we prowled at an extremely slow pace for a couple of hours along the edge, while keeping behind a line of bush for cover. All of a sudden Izak whispered emphatically: "There he is, resting on the ground. Do you see the bare spot with no grass? He is lying in front of the

grass and the bare spot is in front of him.” Initially I felt blind because I couldn’t find the steenbok in my binoculars. But with a short step to the right he came into view. It was indeed the buck from the previous day.

It only took a glance in front of us to know that this wasn’t going to be an easy stalk. The steenbok was only seventy meters away, but apart from a few small bushes and grass, there wasn’t much between us. The only way the stalk was going to be successful was if we got low to the ground. It was the only option. Izak crept slowly but surely forward like a leopard and I followed in his tracks directly behind him. At the last bush he stopped and reached for my rangefinder. He then whispered, “He is lying at forty meters nicely broadside looking to the front – now or never, Frank.”

It was now up to me. I rose slowly to my knees, quietly knocked an arrow, and carefully brought my bow to full draw. Now in a shooting position I noticed that I would have to move to the right a bit for a clear shot, and as I did this I couldn’t help but remember how quickly a steenbok can jump up and vanish. I made my move and still the buck had no idea we were there. My forty meter pin settled on the spot low in the vitals where Isak told me to aim. Any reluctance to shoot a bedded steenbok had faded over the near decade it took for me to get another opportunity. My heart was beating wildly in my chest as I tried to aim. This steenbok meant a lot to me. I took a final deep breath and tapped the trigger of my release. A split second later the arrow hammered into the antelope’s body exactly

where I had aimed. “Yes!” Izak whispered with a sizzling sound. “The arrow passed through,” he continued with a sound of joy in his voice. He had followed the action through his binoculars. The steenbok didn’t even make it to his legs before expiring. Izak smiled at me, shook my hand, hugged me and said: “Congrats, well done my friend. You got your steenbok!”

I was overwhelmed with emotion when we walked up to the magnificent little beast. Finally, after all the years of trying a beautiful trophy steenbok was at my feet. Sometimes the grandest trophies aren’t that big after all. Thank you, Isak. ■



A female steenbok – one of the prettiest of the small antelope species.

