

The Sudan At Lake Nyubor And Hunting The Hippopotamus

"We quietly stalk the great hippo in our canoes, silently gliding through the water. The harpooner stands in the bow, and the trick is to allow the hippo to expose his body out of the water near enough for the harpooner to make his thrust. This is a very exciting hunt and we get lots of meat. 1977, Lake Nyubor, Sudan, Makoi, Dinka Warrior.

There, on top of the anthill, stood a splendid warrior, relaxed in classic foot on knee position. He was fierce looking and gleaming black, like polished ebony, in the midday sun. Silhouetted and armed with three spears, he was a wild and impressive sight. He was unclothed, his only adornments being an ivory bracelet on his right arm above the biceps, and in a similar position on his left arm a knife snug in its sheath. He looked at us with arrogant disdain. His upper body was tattooed with cicatrix; pock marks made with a hot knife and ash, to celebrate his high standing as a feared fighter. He had killed men in tribal clashes. "Me, Makoi," he said. "What?" I replied. "The real McCoy?" My client, Carol Mann, and I laughed and he laughed with us, not knowing why such mirth but enjoying the banter anyway. "Me work for you." It was a statement, not a request. There was no room for refusal "Fine, McCoy," I agreed. We needed a local guide. This was our introduction to Lake Nyubor. The lake was in view and we made for an island with shady trees near the lake shore, and set up camp. Makoi was very much in charge and controlled the Dinka people who came in to camp to view these odd white people who had arrived out of the blue. He was the only one who had a smattering of English, which we found out he had learnt from a missionary in Rumbek, a small town a day's drive away.

All the Dinka people were natural, with their bodies' unconcealed, except for married women who wore a thin cloth around their waist. They were indifferent to clothing, and in view of the heat, understandably so. The community of people living at the lakeside were in stark contrast to Makoi. They had a ghostly look about them as they had covered their bodies in white ash, made from burnt cow dung. This, I was told, was an effective repellent against the myriad mosquitoes of Lake Nyubor. They were splendid people, tall, thin, muscled and with charming smiling faces with completely white teeth. They were happy, always laughing, totally unspoiled in any way. Makoi brought in two well-muscled naked warriors to meet me. "He Ding," he pointed at the one, and "He, Dong" he introduced the other. This was too much for Carol, who doubled up in laughter. This set us all off again, including all the safari crew and Dinkas in the camp, none of whom understood the joke, but all enjoying a good laugh, until tears were streaming out of our eyes. "He's joking" said Carol. "Not at all," I replied. "These are common names around here." And that set us all off again, much to the Dinkas' delight. Lake Nyubor -we had arrived. It was love at first sight.

Vast herds of long horned Dinka cattle frequented the flood plains, and the area was teeming with wildlife. Mrs Grey's lechwe (Nile lechwe), white eared cob, hippo, crocodile, elephant, buffalo, white rhino, lion, leopard, tiang antelope, waterbuck, warthog, reedbuck and roan antelope abounded. We even found a curly horned sitatunga with ivory tips, on the very first afternoon, which Carol shot. What a place. The Dinka were very much part of the scene and so were their cattle.

Makoi, informed us that a short distance away, there were other white people, a man and a woman. Imagine our surprise to hear that another expedition had arrived before ours. This was, after all, one of the remotest parts of Sudan. We set out immediately to see for ourselves, and met Richard and Julia Kemp, a husband and wife filming team for Anglia television. They were here at Lake Nyubor to film the Dinka and in particular to capture a hippo hunt with harpoons, in the traditional Dinka way. So far, they had been unsuccessful, because the Dinka were ill at ease with Richard and his camera. But, that was to change quickly, because Julia watching Richard filming noticed something unusual. Richard was the only one with trousers on. "Try taking off your trousers" she said. "What me?" he replied. "Yes, who else, you are the only one with trousers on. Take them off." Richard, feeling very embarrassed and sheepish, complied, to much hooting and laughter from the Dinka. From that moment, Richard never looked back and his embarrassment soon forgotten, he went out filming in the clothes God gave him, and established an amazing rapport with these magnificent people.

Richard built a raft out of two canoes with a platform and with this ungainly apparatus, was paddled out into the swamp to accompany the hippo hunt. Makoi, Ding and Dong and all the warriors, some 30 of them, piled into six canoes. They had already selected a hippo to hunt for an annual celebration commemorating the dry season, which



My good friend the late Sam Winston with an excellent Mrs Grey's or Nile Lechwe. We used the ARGO all terrain tracked vehicle for access to the swamps. Lechwe were common on the flood plains and they had specially adapted elongated hooves for walking over the floating vegetation. 1976.



Myself with a fine Mrs Grey's Lechwe. Hunted by one of my clients. The Sudan Government only allowed one Mrs Grey's Lechwe per person per lifetime! The only such condition placed on the hunting of an animal anywhere that I know of! Pagarou, near Nyubor in 1979.

lowered the level of the lake enough to where they could wade, fishing with their spears. The trick to hippo spearing, as Makoi told me, was to sneak up quietly in the canoes, without disturbing the herd, and select a loner. They would move up very slowly in the canoes, in the hopes that the hippo would surface near enough so that one of the harpooners standing in the bow of the canoe could thrust the harpoon into the animal. The harpoon was really a long lance, with a detachable head that had a fifteen foot rope and a large wooden float attached to it.

Makoi was the harpooner in the lead canoe, and succeeded in getting close enough to his quarry. He thrust the weapon deep into the water as it broke surface a few feet away from him. The hippo careered off creating a bow wave that almost swamped the canoes. It was like a scene out of Moby Dick. The rope ran fast and at its limit pulled the buoy overboard. Wherever the hippo went the buoy followed. The hippo couldn't escape. Each time he came up, the canoes and Dinkas were in place ready, and another harpoon was stabbed into him. In no time at all there were four or five buoys bobbing about in the slip-wake of the hippo. The canoes were converging in for the kill and the hippo charged. He charged underwater. It was unnerving for the Dinka. All they could see were the buoys streaking towards them. This was too much for some of them, who jumped out of the canoes away from the enraged beast. The next second the hippo erupted out of the water, opened his jaws and clamped on to the nearest canoe, upsetting the remaining men into the water. The rest converged on the hippo and riddled him with throwing spears. The water was red with blood. It was an orgy of carnage. Finally the hippo died and unbelievably no one was hurt.

I said to Makoi that I thought this was incredibly risky to hunt a hippo this way. He agreed that it was dangerous, but when he considered the excitement of the hunt and even though the hippo could bite a canoe in half or even bite a person in half, he felt the risk was well worth it. "Look at all the meat we get," he said.

The Dinka feasted on the hippo for a whole day and ate all three tons of meat. There were fights and squabbles over tasty morsels, such as the fat from the stomach, which was held in high regard not only for cooking but also as an ointment for rubbing and polishing their skins. Amazing that no one was badly injured by a flaying knife, with more than 100 people hacking and cutting away at their bountiful supper. Richard had made his film, unscathed, except for a touch of sunburn!

As a youngster in Kenya, my first recollection of how antagonistic a hippo can be, was at Lake Naivasha when I was seven years old. An old bull hippo had upset several sailing skiffs at the Naivasha Sailing Club, and my father being the Game Warden of the area, was called out to deal with it. I went with him, but on the understanding that I would remain on the shore. On arrival at the Club, we could see the hippo close by to the sailing boats. My father was told that simply going near to him, by boat, was enough to provoke a charge. Several people had had a good ducking, narrowly escaping with their lives. My father stood in the front of a rowing boat and an oarsman took him out into the lake towards the hippo. When they were about 50 yards away, the bull, who had been watching them keenly, submerged. With his .470 rifle shouldered, my father waited. He got the shock of his life when the hippo's head reared up, mouth agape, within feet of the boat. He had misjudged his charge slightly. A quick shot from the .470 to the hippo's brain, ended the drama. The hippo came to the surface some two hours later, much to the delight of the local people working for the sailing club, and the Lake Hotel, who all converged for a free meal.

In 1962 when I left school, my first job was on Mrs Nancy Miller's Kongoni farm at Naivasha. My job was to keep the hippo out of her lucerne fields. The hippo at Naivasha had become extremely partial to eating lucerne, during the night, and created huge amounts of damage not only from eating the lucerne, but also from treading on the aluminum irrigation pipes. Everything had been tried to stop their nightly foraging including thunder flashes and electric fences, to no avail. These hippo were very smart, and as the wind blew from the shore to the lake, they would never approach any plantation if they got even the slightest whiff of a game scout waiting up for them. At about the same time, Lynn Temple Boreham, the famous Game Warden of Narok district, had me gazetted as an Honorary Game Warden for the Naivasha area. This was a great honour, at such a young age, and my main task was to help control hippo and buffalo. I talked to Major Temple Boreham about the hippo problem and he told me to go ahead and use any means to reduce the numbers around the little lake at Naivasha. He was continually being harassed by incensed farmers' complaints, and something drastic had to be done.