

Between the Congo River and the White Nile

with notes on Angola, Cameroon, Chad,
Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Guinea-Conakry,
Rwanda, Somalia, and Urundi



by

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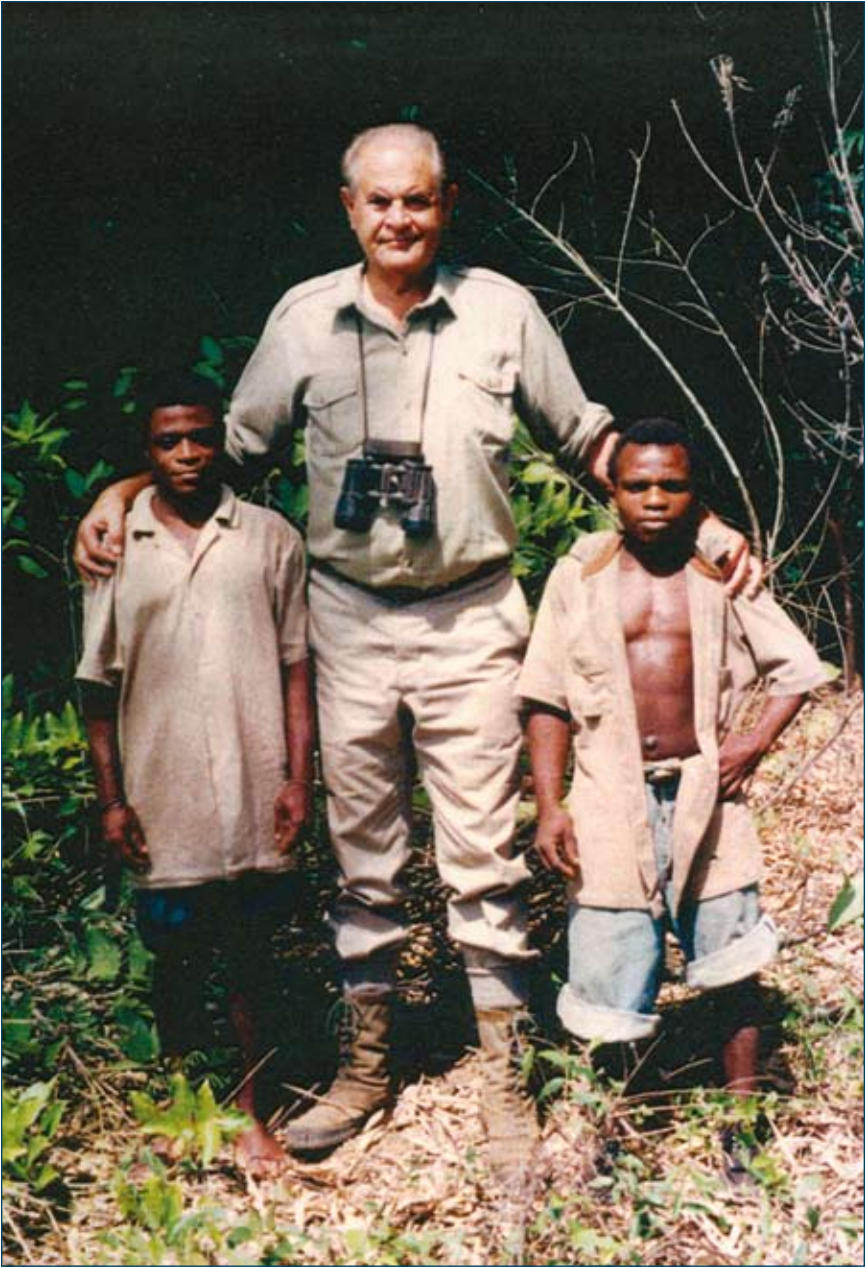
The Nile and Central African Savanna Buffaloes

Throughout my life under the African sun I have had a chance to see many thousands of buffaloes, and I have collected a number of them. I've guided other hunters on sport safaris; I've been engaged in control operations to reduce their numbers, to feed hungry mouths, and to protect crops; and, of course, I've hunted buffaloes for my own pleasure. Some of my encounters with buffaloes caused me some anxious moments, but without being overly dramatic, there is no activity in the world that does not involve a risk. I have said many times that risk has to be accepted as part of hunting, whether we pretend it is or not.

A popular myth is that the buffalo always attacks when it is injured. I will never say that buffaloes are some poor animals, because the truth is they are not, but on the other hand I will not be tempted to describe them—as do those who wish to sensationalize their encounters—with human characteristics. These sensationalists describe buffaloes as being mean, traitorous, revengeful, cruel, and bloodthirsty animals. To me, labeling a buffalo in these terms are nothing more than exaggerations of cheap literature, a product of mediocre and useless hunters. We have to remember that irrational animals are guided only by their will or instinct to survive, and buffaloes are no exception to this rule.

My debut with the Nile buffalo came about in the most unexpected way. In December of 1959 General Taher, commander in chief of the troops stationed in the southern Sudan, visited my house in Juba to ask a favor of me. From the moment we met, I felt that he was a very nice man, and we established a solid friendship. The general explained that

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Tony Schez-Ariño is a hunter of “the old school.” He celebrated sixty-one years of hunting professionally in Africa in July 2012. Here he is seen with two Pygmies of the Congo.

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Christmas was coming and he didn't have the means to celebrate it in a decent way. He said that the soldiers from the south were Christians, and he wanted to know if I would hunt a large number of buffaloes to help provide his troops with a Christmas celebration. He told me that I would have a couple of army trucks to transport the buffalo carcasses to the headquarters in Juba, some of which were big Mack trucks able to transport tons of cargo.

Of course, I said yes and that I would be delighted to help. I had with me a lot of ammunition for the .416 Rigby. I was twenty-nine at the time and I had always focused on hunting elephants, so going after buffaloes still held a charm for me. I had no way of knowing then that I would have many, many opportunities to hunt buffaloes in my lifetime.

The garrison consisted of about six thousand soldiers, so the general estimated that I would need to hunt at least eighty buffaloes. Based on my experience in other countries where these animals were quite elusive, that task appeared at the best difficult, and at the worst complete nonsense. Thinking that I had gotten myself into a mess, I left Juba in an old Land Rover followed by two gigantic Mack trucks equipped with extremely powerful electric winches.

In principle I decided that I would move ahead of the Mack trucks to hunt the buffaloes, which would remain a half-mile or so behind me. Once I had shot a number of buffaloes, the Mack trucks would move up. I also had a team of helpers to load the hunted carcasses onto the trucks. The general gave me two military radios to communicate between my position and the back-up staff, which would be a big help in the organization and deployment of the various crews.

Because I was new to the area, I wasn't familiar with the situation of the buffalo in Sudan, but I had hired expert trackers and gunbearers before I left Juba. One was a Lotuka native named Agustino Legu, who was a decorated hero in the war against the Italians. This man was to spend twenty-five years with me. Agustino told me that there was no problem getting that number of buffaloes and that we should go to a certain area in Jabur, on the shore of the White Nile and halfway between Juba and Mongalla, which is exactly what we did.

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We crossed the river by the Atbara ferry, which ran from six in the morning to six in the afternoon. We then proceeded north, following a sandy road that was in good shape. We stayed on this road until Agustino asked me to leave and to advance into the forest, going west. Quickly the trees disappeared and then we arrived at an enormous open plain.

Looking out over the open landscape, I saw little black points everywhere. These were Nile buffaloes, and they were not only quiet but they also hardly noticed our presence. When I saw that, my worries disappeared. That plain looked like an enormous buffalo farm, which is so very different from today when you cannot see a single buffalo. There have simply been too many years of civil war, poaching, and general chaos for that paradise to have remained unscathed.

This hunting expedition was purely for meat, but even so I set certain parameters. I tried not to kill any females, and I focused on the males as there were industrial quantities of them. I also avoided killing any big trophies as I left those for the sport hunters who had to pay high prices for their safaris. The beginning was great and in the first three hours I had shot twelve buffaloes. I was able to get close to them, and I made the shots with no problem and without using a riflescope, which I have in my career used on only very few occasions. My .416 Rigby had an open scope, and that's why I had to get as close as possible. I made sure that the first shot was the definitive one!

The truth is that none of these buffaloes posed a risk or a problem for me because it was obvious that they had heard very few shots in their lives. Once the carcasses of the buffaloes were loaded on the trucks, the crew used cables to hold them tight so that they wouldn't fall off with the movement of the vehicles. Once everything was set and we were completely loaded, we quickly left for Juba so as to avoid the hottest hours of the day.

After slaughtering so many animals, we didn't want to spoil the meat. We needed to arrive before eleven in the morning or after four in the afternoon because during that time the temperature ranged between 104 and 113 degrees F (40 and 45 C).

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Our arrival in Juba was triumphant. Everybody we passed saw what we were transporting, and, of course, all and sundry clamored for a piece of meat. We arrived at headquarters where General Taher received me with open arms, thanking me effusively. We both decided that I wouldn't hunt the next day so that we would have time to butcher the buffaloes. We decided to wait two days, and then we repeated the mission.

All in all, I hunted seventy-two buffaloes on these outings, which was almost the number that General Taher had requested. I explained to the general that besides the eighty buffaloes that he had asked for, I wanted to hunt a couple more for the Catholic mission of the Combonian Fathers. This mission had many schools and many people to feed, and I always wanted to help them when I could. He said there was no problem.

The last expedition was again on the plains of Jabur, where for the first time an injured buffalo attacked me. He charged in a straight line, but twenty yards away he stopped for some unexplainable reason and looked me in the eyes. We spent a few moments like two knights in the middle of a duel, and then he decided to get closer to me. He advanced four or five more steps, but a bullet from my .416 Rigby knocked him down with no problem. This ended "Operation Buffalo," with enough meat to celebrate Christmas nicely for the military troops and for the Catholic schools. This made me feel better about all those poor buffaloes that I was forced to kill.

The next day I received a very nice surprise. General Taher invited me for lunch and then gave me a big bag of mangoes, which I love, and three boxes of ammunition for the .416 Rigby. This meant thirty cartridges, and only God and himself knew where he got those because he didn't say a word about it. They were much appreciated as replacements for the ones I had used to hunt his buffaloes. This was a satisfactory end to the business, or as the Italians used to say: *Tutti contenti!*

In my youth, Nile buffaloes were abundant in Sudan, very common in the northeast of the Belgian Congo, less common in the west of Ethiopia, and abundant in the west and northwest of Uganda. By 2012 they had almost become extinct in Sudan, and the same happened in Ethiopia and in the Belgian Congo, where their numbers

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*Tony poses with a typical Nile buffalo, *Syncerus caffer aequinoctialis*, he hunted in the middle of high grass.*

have been reduced, too. In Uganda, however, and after all the misdeeds committed by the crazy homicidal murderer Idi Amin, there has been a great recovery. Now hunts there permit you to take two buffaloes on a safari of at least 16 days. The first costs U.S. \$2,000 and the second costs \$1,500, and to this amount you have to add the U.S. \$22,121 for the price of the safari (cost in 2011).

When I was young, we hunted many Nile buffaloes on sport safaris, but back then they were considered a pest and could be hunted in an unlimited way. Many of the sport hunters who traveled to southern Sudan were crazy about buffaloes, especially the Spanish, Italians, and Germans, all aficionados of these animals.

Personally, I never was a “bloodthirsty” buffalo hunter. I have shot 2,092 buffaloes, so my previous statement might be interpreted as a contradiction, but there is an explanation: During my sixty-one years

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as an African hunter, I have been in countries where buffaloes were considered a real pest because of the problems they caused for agriculture and so on. Many official requests were made to me to end their excesses, and I was very involved in the control of these animals. With hunts I have conducted to control crop raiders, to guide on sport safaris, and for my personal hunting, I have accounted for more than two thousand buffaloes, something that today, in the sunset of my life, doesn't make me especially proud.

I always liked the occasional hunting of a big buffalo with beautiful horns. My best trophy is a Cape buffalo that I hunted in the old Tanganyika. Its horns measure 51 inches wide (1.275 meters), which I ended giving to a collector friend who almost had a heart attack when he saw the trophy!

I had something happen to me once that shows the mentality of the African people, even when they look very "polished" on the exterior. It was in January of 1991, and I had been invited by Mobutu Sese Seko, the president of Zaire, to conduct a survey of the country's elephants. I was to look at their situation and to decide if it was appropriate to reopen the hunting of elephants there. Somebody must have told him about me and my past experiences as an elephant hunter and explorer in this country, and, I believe, that is the reason for the invitation.

After visiting different areas, I arrived in Nagero, which is where the administrative center for the National Park of the Garamba was located. President Mobutu had sent a cargo plane with tents, food, and all manner of drinks there, the personnel to organize and manage all that gear, and two all-terrain Toyotas for the trip over the region. Surprisingly, everything was in perfect shape.

The director of the Garamba park was very nice and polite, and he insisted that I should use one of the old chalets from the Belgian era instead of staying in a tent; I accepted thinking that it would be more comfortable. Unfortunately, it was exactly the opposite. There was no running water, not even in the bathroom, and when it rained, there was more water inside of the cabin than outside. It was an "organized" disaster. Of course, the generator that produced the electricity had "passed

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This is a Central African savanna buffalo, Syncerus caffer brachyceros.

away” many years previously, and at night any light we had came from oil lamps and lanterns, and let me say that using African batteries when new produce less light than an almost-dead regular one.

The survey I was to do was in an area inaccessible to vehicles; the closest I could get to it was thirty-seven (sixty kilometers) away because there were no more roads. Because of this, I had to get up at two o'clock in the morning in the “Nagero Hilton,” wash my face, drink a coffee, and run to look for the elephants’ promised land. I have to confess that President Mobutu from the beginning was always nice to me, and he gave me two ministers to help me with any problem that I might have. One was from the game department and the other was from the national parks; both were very nice people. I have very good memories of them, and I hope that they are OK after all the continual disasters that have happened to the Congo and their natives since then. To move from one area to the other, the president provided us with a

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magnificent jet, very comfortable, with two Belgian pilots who treated me as if I were the first minister of Spain or something like that.

One of the funny things about this trip was that at the end of the landing strip from Nagero, we had to walk across the Dungu River, which was forty yards wide, with the water up to our waists. We had to use a stick to prevent the currents from dragging us downstream, and I had to wear my cartridge belt and put my .416 Rigby rifle around my neck during this adventure. I remember that the water was so cold it took our breath away! On the other side we had to climb a slope of five or six yards, slipping and cursing, until we finally arrived at the top. Once there we found ourselves in the middle of an ash sea because the grass had recently been burned, and all this ash stuck to our wet clothes and shoes. We became absolutely filthy walking in the ash for the one hour that it took us to dry off. By the way, the two ministers stayed on the other side of the Dungu River, comfortably waiting in the vehicles. They said they would stay there to “take care” of the water and drinks. . . . *Ay!*

The first day of the survey I saw very few elephant tracks, but many buffalo herds stopped to look at us without any fear. I’m sure they had never seen a hunter before. After walking more than twelve miles (twenty kilometers) without seeing a single damn elephant, I decided to return to the cars because it was obvious that we were wasting our time. The buffaloes were everywhere and paid not the slightest attention to us. When we were close to the Dungu River, the crew asked me to kill a couple of buffaloes for the meat because it had been some time since they had had any meat to eat.

Of course I didn’t have any problem with their request, and I quickly hunted two males with my .416 Rigby. With great skill, they quartered the two and then skewered them with poles to transport them. After a little while, we again arrived at the Dungu River, this time to reverse the adventure we had had that morning. When we got to the cars, the first thing that I did was to guzzle a one-liter bottle of mineral water and eat a handful of cookies because with so many things on our minds, we had forgotten to bring water and food, something that happens frequently in these situations.

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When the two ministers saw the meat, they both jumped in happiness, but when they tried to get some pieces of meat for themselves, they were violently “rejected” by the owners, who didn’t care if they were ministers of the central government. The members of the crew stated that the meat was theirs and only theirs, and there was to be no further argument. When I explained to their excellencies that I barely had seen an elephant, but that there were buffaloes everywhere, they asked me to forget for one moment about the elephants and to kill a portion of buffaloes. They wanted to take the meat, once it was smoked and dry, to Kinshasa to share with their families and to use the jet that President Mobutu had put at our disposal.

When I returned to Nagero, all dirty, muddy, and with a disgusting appearance because of the ashes, I washed myself as best as I could in a big zinc tub full of water that had been placed on the bathroom floor for my use. Once I felt human again, I went out of the house, and because I again had on clean clothes, I found myself happy. As soon as the two ministers and the park director saw me, they approached to



Tony in the Sudan with an exceptional Nile buffalo.

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say that “Operation Elephant” was on hold for a few days to give me time to kill a good quantity of buffaloes. It was obvious they were all excited about the vision of countless pounds of meat.

Of course, I said yes; I didn’t have another option. At the awful hour of two o’clock in the morning of the next day, we woke up and started the travel to “Buffaloland,” but this time there were numerous park personnel in addition to the two ministers. We took one truck from the park to transport the meat because it had been a big deal to transport the meat of two buffaloes the day before. We had to hang them with ropes from the sides of the vehicle because we didn’t have space in the Toyotas that were full of personnel and paraphernalia. The cars were unrecognizable, full of blood and garbage.

Finally we arrived at the same place as the day before. We crossed the Dungu River, and we “battered” ourselves in ashes on the other side of the river . . . and I started hunting. This time the ministers came too, and the drivers stayed to take care of the vehicles. They were quite desperate at being left behind because they thought that they wouldn’t get any meat, but I promised them a buffalo for the three of them.

In a couple of hours I was able to hunt six buffaloes, and with the help of one of the park sergeants we decided how to dispose of the meat equitably so that everyone would get some meat and so that we would avoid the “inevitable” fights. I thought this plan would work, but then I heard a heated discussion. When I got closer to see what was happening, I saw one of the ministers with a knife in his hand butchering a buffalo, while one of the park game scouts was asserting that the minister was stealing his buffalo. To calm a situation that was getting very tense, I offered to kill another buffalo for the game scout. That way the minister could carry on cutting up the buffalo in front of him. At that moment, by the way, the minister looked like a butcher from a public market, all covered in blood, dirty and cutting the meat like a professional.

When we returned to Nagero, we decided to stay there for the next day in order to have the time to build some large grills on which to dry the meat. We used green logs, which was the traditional system used throughout the equatorial jungles of Central and West Africa. By the way, this meat, after the smoking and drying process, has the

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most disgusting odor that I had ever smelled in my life, but since everyone has different preferences, they ate it with much pleasure and gusto. Disgusting!

Since I don't want to be boring and repetitive, I will only say that hunting buffaloes for meat for that crew lasted longer than I thought or wanted. In essence I became the official butcher of the area. After I had hunted a total of twenty-seven poor buffaloes, I said to myself that enough was enough. I then told the assembled crew, including the two ministers and park personnel, that I didn't have any more ammunition, which wasn't true, but I had to find an excuse to end that slaughter before I decimated the buffalo population in the area. I felt it a disgusting exhibition of human greed for meat—they were like bottomless pits. I have to admit, however, that when hunger strikes, there is no good solution, and making wordy recommendations by people with full stomachs doesn't help the problem. Even those two ministers forgot their rank and fought for the meat, and you could tell that food was not abundant in their houses, either.

Buffalo hunting has always been popular among European and American sport hunters, and back in my youth Sudan was a real paradise for this activity. Personally, I didn't like to kill large numbers of any one species, which I considered nothing more than slaughter. When hunting with me, the limit was six buffaloes for a twenty-one-day safari and eight in twenty-eight days. Back then it was common to spend three to four weeks on a safari, something that is rare today. Nowadays, most hunters are in a rush, and they prefer to get what they want in three or four days. I always looked for quality rather than quantity, which I consider to be real hunting. The fact that I had hunted a large number of individuals on government control operations was something totally different from sport hunting, and I always tried to separate both activities as much as I could.

The closest "cousin" of the Nile buffalo is the inhabitant of the Central African savanna, *Syncerus caffer brachyceros*, that can be

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found in southern Chad, east of the Central African Republic, and west of Sudan. It's smaller in body and trophy than the Nile buffalo, and hunting them can prove very interesting because this animal can be aggressive when it is bothered or hurt. Precisely on the northeast border of the Central African Republic is the Andre Felix National Park. It is south of the town of Birao, and this area was famous because of the immense quantity of buffaloes that were once found within its borders.

The park was named in honor of Andre Felix, an outstanding administrator of the area in colonial times, a great hunter, and a fervent fauna protector—like all hunters should be. Andre Felix was a passionate hunter of buffalo, and to that end he used a .416 Rigby made in Belgium and a Mauser 9.3x62 that always gave him very good results. He once ran out of ammunition for the .416 Rigby, and I gave him two boxes, one of solid bullets and another one of expanding bullets.

Sometime later, I was told that he injured a buffalo that escaped into the bushes, as can happen. Instead of using the .416, maybe to save ammunition, he went after the wounded buffalo with the 9.3x62, which is a good caliber but, in my opinion, lacks stopping power in case of an emergency. That's what happened on that occasion. It looks like the buffalo charged him from close range, and the solid projectile of 285 grains (18.38 grams) didn't stop the charge, and, as a result the hunter was killed by his supposed victim. This was a disgrace that maybe could have been avoided had Felix used the .416 Rigby with its superior strength and stopping power.

During my career as an African hunter, I have had many adventures with buffaloes, some of them from pretty close, and if I'm here to talk about it, it is because I never took liberties with them no matter where they live. Probably even more important, I have always used calibers with enough stopping power to solve any situation. When a buffalo decides to charge, I can assure you that you can never have too heavy of a caliber.

From my experience, the calibers that gave me the best security and positive results were the .416 Rigby, the .500 Jeffery with a 535-

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grain bullet, and the .505 Gibbs with a 525-grain bullet, all using the Mauser repeating system. For double-barrel rifles, the .500/.465 Nitro with a 480-grain projectile, the .475 No. 2 Nitro Express, also with 480 grains, and the heavy .577 Nitro Express with a 750-grain bullet.

In smaller calibers the 9.3x64 Brenneke and the .375 magnum also gave me good results. Logically, they lack the impact shock and stopping power required in some circumstances, for example when following an injured buffalo in a dense forest with poor visibility. Personally, I have hunted many of these animals using my .300 H&H Magnum with solid bullets, but I cannot definitively say that this is the perfect combination for this activity.

Considering the ammunition that we have these days, magnificent in all respects, and counting on the fact that a buffalo won't wait for the bullet that is destined for him, I would recommend using an expanding bullet to make the first shot. Today there are many magnificent expanding bullets, and these always will cause great damage to the animal's anatomy. The second shot, and the next ones, must be made with solid bullets because if the buffalo wasn't killed with the first shot, he will charge with all his power, and a solid bullet is the only one able to stop an attack or to keep him from running away. In the latter case, a solid bullet that impacts him below the tail will go through his entire body until it reaches the lungs, heart, or the aorta.

There are many excellent calibers on the market for hunting buffaloes, and some perfect for this activity include the .404 Jeffery, the .425 Westley Richards, the .458 Lott, and the .465 Rimless H&H. In double-barrel rifles, I've had best results with the .450/.400 Nitro, the .450 Nitro, the .470 Nitro, and the .500 Nitro. The once famous .458 Winchester is not very common in Africa today because its expanding ammunition of 510 grains has a reputation for poor penetration on buffaloes.

I only had one real "deadly" charge from a Central African savanna buffalo. I was on a safari with a friend of mine in the Central African Republic, and one morning when we were looking for the

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elusive Derby eland, we found a herd of buffaloes. Among them a huge specimen stood out. Quickly, we decided that we were going to try to hunt him, and, taking advantage of the abundant grass and trees, we got within sixty yards of him without being noticed. Then, my friend fired his .375 magnum, which hit the buffalo a little bit high in the shoulder. This is a common mistake among hunters because the heart of a buffalo is located very low in the chest.

With the shot, the wounded buffalo turned and charged the point of detonation, and with him came the entire herd. This was one scary vision. When they were twenty yards from the tree where we had taken refuge, the rest of the herd turned to the left and continued in that direction, while the injured buffalo continued charging with his head lifted for a better vision, like buffaloes always do in this situation. This let me aim at the middle of his snout, and I knocked him down with a shot directly to the brain, which was possible because his head was lifted. The truth is that it was impressive to see that animal's determination to attack us. There was no doubt or hesitation; he came at full speed; and he meant business. From his point of view, his reaction was natural: He had been shot when he was out and about having a pleasant morning stroll while looking for grass and water, only to be accosted by some damn Spaniards who had traveled thousands of miles just to give him a hard time!

To end with these notes about the Nile and Central African buffaloes, I would like to say that the Nile buffalo has suffered a dramatic reduction in Sudan where hunting is totally banned; in Ethiopia their numbers have been affected too from poaching; and in the northeast of the Belgian Congo the civil war and the absolute lack of security affecting the region have made hunting an impossibility. The only country that offers opportunities to hunt the Nile buffalo is Uganda, where their numbers have recovered so much that the government now authorizes hunts for two specimens per person for perfectly organized sport safaris. Poaching has also reduced the number of the *brachyceros* buffalo, a native of the Central African savanna, in Chad and in Sudan, but fortunately it is still common in the Central African Republic.

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It is still possible to hunt the two subspecies of buffaloes—the *aequinoctialis* of the Nile and the *brachyceros* from Central Africa. Given the regulations for hunting these two subspecies in the countries where they occur, the sport hunter and the trophy collector should still have many good opportunities to obtain a trophy buffalo.

