

TROPHY FEVER

By Dave Fulson
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As an outfitter who both guides clients and outfits hunters to big game destinations around the globe, I am responsible for answering questions concerning all aspects of each hunt I advertise. There are of course the usual “How much, how many days, what month, what do I bring and what are the accommodations like” questions that, as they rightfully should, come up when a prospective client and I discuss a potential trip.

Without a doubt though the most often asked question I have to answer is “How big?” Followed in a majority of cases by the infamous “I only want the biggest” quote from the prospective client.

So lets spend some time today examining that scenario from several different angles:

First, lets look at the animals we hunt. Every species of big game animal on the planet has a certain criteria that record book organizations use to rate its trophy quality. Elk, moose, deer and the like are judged by the combined inches and mass their antlers acquire during their lifetime. Upon harvest, the animal can then be measured and scored. If he meets the minimum score of whatever record-keeping organization you choose to request entry into, than his score and the hunter’s name will forever be listed within the pages of that record book.

For animals like Kudu, Buffalo, Impala and Waterbuck, it’s the horns. The big cats use the skull size officially, but unofficially the squared size of the skin or nose-to-tail measurement of the hide is what determines trophy proportions. Elephant and wart hogs use tusk measurements (elephants by the tusk weight) to qualify trophy status.

My point is that hunters and hunting organizations have come up with extremely detailed methods to separate the average specimen from the exceptional trophy.

It is a fact of life that just as in people, some animals may have better trophy potential than others of the same species. The reason the Empire State Building stands out is that it is far taller than it’s neighbors if you judge it by height. Trophy animals, by their very definition, are much more rare than the average specimen that a hunter is likely to encounter on a hunt.

If every hunter in camp, for example, said “I want at least a 57 inch Kudu”, then you’d better have a hell of a herd of huge, never-hunted Kudu, or expect most of the hunters to go home disappointed. It’s the same for a mountain goat in Montana or a Sable in Zimbabwe.

The really big ones are rare in numbers and due to the fact that they have survived predators and hunting pressure for the number of years necessary to grow to trophy proportions, they are infinitely smarter and more wary by nature, than the other animals in the local herd.

Sure, everyone who hunts would like to take a record-book animal each time they go out. But

my experience allows me to realize that this has never been, and never will be the case with any species of animal no matter where you hunt.

Now for the good news! Trophy animals and even record-book quality animals are still out there. Some will be taken by hunters who were simply in the right spot at the right time. Reading a story about a 14-year-old kid from Jo'burg shooting a Rowland Ward Kudu ten minutes into his first morning of hunting still gives me heartburn, but Lady Luck always plays a big part when an exceptional animal is bagged.

Thankfully though, many of the best heads are taken by sportsmen who were specifically looking for a quality animal, had researched the area they were hunting and its trophy potential, and were determined not to settle for a lesser animal than they had set their sights on.

Reasonable expectations are a good starting point. Hunt hard, put in the hours, hire the best P.H., hike from dawn till dusk and use the best equipment money can buy, and all your efforts still won't result in a trophy if you're hunting an over-crowded, over-harvested concession where the average head taken is 2 1/2 years old!

Research the species you want to take if a record-book animal is your goal. Where is the best area for trophies according to recent record books? Are there specific P.H.s or outfitters who consistently take trophy animals, and if so where do they operate?

Another consideration is how much does the hunt cost? Fact: The top outfitters operate in the best concessions. They use the best equipment, hire the best trackers, spend more time scouting, and none of that comes without expense.

Good outfitters, whether it's an operator in Texas or a professional hunter in Africa, know that they are good. Their record on trophy animals shows it and their repeat business and good referrals from past clients is a testament to that fact. Their hunts are priced accordingly.

Each year, dozens of times, I get a call from a prospective client who wants to spend bargain basement prices for top-quality trophies and service. My conversations with fellow outfitters and professional hunters tell me that I am not alone in my experience.

The old cliché, 'You get what you pay for' is never more true than when hunting is considered.

Do not think that you can expect quality hunting (if you use an outfitter) for cheap prices. Many, many times I guide clients who have been burned by fly-by-night operators who lure in clients with low costs, and the promise of great service and trophy animals only to find that both the service and hunting were of poor quality.

It is far less expensive to hire a top outfitter and put your hunt in his capable hands than it is to do several lesser hunts where the financial output grows with each trip, but the trophy sought never comes to bag.

Here's the main question each hunter must answer in his own heart if he has aspirations of being a 'trophy only' hunter: 'Can I look at this hunt as a success even if I go home empty handed?' My experience is that unfortunately, for the vast majority of people I have hunted with over the years, the answer to that question is a resounding "NO".

Hunting is not like buying a truck where you put down your money and drive it home that day. Thank God. But you can't prove that to a growing number of people who think that they are buying an animal when in fact they are paying for the services that will enable them to enjoy a great hunt. A huge difference.

There are many hunts in Africa that allow the client to 'pay as you shoot', where you do not pay a trophy fee if you don't take an animal. These are not guaranteed hunts, but you simply don't pay for the animal until you successfully harvest one. You will still pay a daily rate which will cover the outfitter's camp, food, travel, and staff expenses, but it allows you to wait until the trophy you desire appears, or your allotted hunting time is up.

I enjoy this system and feel that it allows the hunter to feel less pressure to take a lesser animal because he feels a need to justify the expense of a pre-paid trophy fee.

I recently got a phone call from a friend of mine who in my opinion reflects the necessary qualities of a true trophy hunter. This gentleman is in his mid-fifties and has a great deal of North American big game experience as well as plains game safaris to Namibia and South Africa under his belt.

The dangerous game bug finally bit him and he booked a 14-day buffalo/leopard safari with some plains game mixed in with a popular P.H. in Zimbabwe's Zambezi Valley.

This guy is a dedicated trophy hunter. He sets his goals after doing his homework, making calls, researching his areas and outfitters and consulting up-to-date record books for entries of no later than ten years to date. He also puts a reasonable timetable together for hunting days to allow for travel, weather, mechanical breakdowns and the other unseen things that can affect a hunt's outcome.

He returned from Africa with pretty much what I expected him to return with: very nice trophies that capped off with a beautiful Cape Buffalo that would make any hunter's mouth water. He tracked hard each day, passed broken-horned bulls, experienced stalks ruined by lady elephants, fickle winds and bad luck, but never gave up and he trusted his P.H. that it would finally turn their way. Boy did it! They kept at it until they found a Buffalo bull that had all the qualities he wanted and then executed a stalk and shot that resulted in a huge buffalo and the completion of a dream for my friend.

A big Croc, beautiful Kudu and a trophy Waterbuck also found their way into the salt, but one trophy shot I expected to see was missing from the photos.

Equally important to our hunter was a big mature leopard in addition to his buffalo. The same effort was put into baiting the cat and building blinds as was put into the buffalo hunt. During the hunt, my friend had three cats in the tree but never touched the trigger. The first

was a very large female and the second a smaller male which made for easy decisions. But leopard number three was a very decent male, although not the filled-out tom the valley is noted for. After carefully weighing his options and number of hunting days left, our sportsman flipped the safety back to 'on' and enjoyed the splendid sight of a leopard feeding in the early morning light.

A trophy male never came during legal shooting light and my friend left Zim without his cat. A successful hunt? I'll let him answer that. "I knew leopard are never a sure thing when I booked the trip. I had dreamed of taking a leopard for years and I wanted one in the worst way, but I was prepared to hold out for a really mature tom, or go home without one, rather than take an animal that I would not be completely satisfied with, just to fill a tag. But I still had what I consider to be a great leopard hunt, and the vision of those beautiful cats on my bait branch will live with me forever!"

That, to me at least, is the essence of what it takes to be a trophy-only hunter, the ability to go on an expensive hunt, do your best, and come home happy if, for whatever reasons, you come home with an unfilled tag.

Your dream hunt could be for a Gemsbok in South Africa, an elephant in Zimbabwe or a lion in Tanzania. No matter the species, you will have to determine what constitutes a trophy in your own eyes. As an outfitter by trade, and an avid and far-traveling hunter by choice who also enjoys tagging good trophies, let me leave you with a personal observation and a thought or two:

Too many hunters today have tunnel vision that focuses only on the moment of conquest where they imagine themselves standing triumphantly over a now-deceased candidate for "The Book" Things like sunsets, good conversation around a campfire, seeing new country for the first time, meeting and making new friends, and the like, are all lost in the mad scramble to get one bigger than the next guy.

I hate to hear a client define his safari experience, one of life's grandest rewards, in terms such as: "Eight out of ten made Book". Willingness to hold out for a superior animal you will cherish forever is a good thing. Trophy Fever, however, is not.

Record books are fine for reference and I believe they have their place, which in my opinion, is more to recognize the animal that eluded predators and hunting pressure long enough to grow to larger proportions than most of his clan.

But record books alone should NEVER be the single determination of what a trophy is. A trophy 'hunt' is more important to me than a trophy animal. The experience should count for more, or at the very least, as much as a final tape measurement on some score sheet.

Hunt more for the love of the sport. Sometimes you will bag a true trophy, sometimes; most times in fact, the animal eludes our best effort. For the animal the game is truly life or death. For us, it's not nearly so important, so accept the hunts where a record book animal is not bagged as a wonderful opportunity to be in the bush, instead of some form of failure.

Searching for a mature trophy and holding out for such is a wonderful thing. I highly respect those who consistently do it, and to a man, they are all fine Bushmen, and generally really good guys to hunt with. They combine skill, knowledge, patience, respect for the game sought and a great deal of sportsmanship in their efforts. When they succeed, they do so in a humble manner, knowing that they gambled against the odds and won.

When they don't connect, they tip their hat to the victor and go away knowing that they played the game fairly, and to the best of their ability. This is the essence of a true trophy hunter. Lets all work to make sure he's not a dying breed.