



Hunting Benin's 'Other' Buffalo

By Bertrand de Courcy

As a French hunter, I've had a certain advantage when traveling to former 'French Africa' to hunt. Most English-speakers tend to hunt East or Southern Africa, where they can hunt the Big Five with the comfort of their own language.

Since I started hunting Africa in 1975, I've had the chance to hunt both West and Central Africa. Not only has this given me the opportunity to collect the unique species found only in those countries, I also enjoy 'French Africa's' different style of hunting. Nevertheless, no matter where I hunt in Africa, buffalo is always on the list.

I was lucky enough to first hunt Benin back in the old days when there were no PHs. Even on dangerous species like (what the SCI Trophy Record Book calls the) West African savanna buffalo (*Syncerus caffer planiceros*), anyone who wanted to go hunting had to go it alone with only a local tracker as back-up. It was a truly great adventure and gave one a real sense of hunting. I became deeply involved in every aspect of the hunt and learnt tremendously about the behaviour of the different species I encountered.

Although Benin's buffalo are smaller than the Cape buffalo, weighing 700 to 900 lbs (320 to 410 kg), I don't think they are easier to hunt or less dangerous. The capacity of those bulls to fight is unbelievable, especially given their habitat of mixed savannah and woodland mosaics, including areas with grass, thickets and reeds, as well as waterways and even forests.

In 1980, I hunted Penjari in the Porga region of Benin. Porga is in the north at the border with Burkina Faso. In fact, the border is basically the Penjari River. From Cotonou it's a long day's drive using the main north-south track. As in most French African countries, the safari camp consisted of individual thatched rondavels. Air conditioning was definitely not part of the lifestyle! In that part of Africa,

it is very hot during the dry season (January to April), particularly in March. Temperatures are high from mid-morning up till the last hours of stalking, and the hunting is demanding and requires good physical condition.

That day we woke up around 6 a.m., and after a quick cup of coffee and a piece of bread (no English breakfast in West Africa) we jumped in the car and started to drive towards the hunting area. As the sun rose we started looking carefully at the track for buffalo spoor. We found the first one 45 minutes after we left the camp and checked its freshness. It's important here to estimate the lead-time the animals have on you. Over an hour, and it will be very difficult to catch up. The average rate of travel for buffalo is about 5.4 km per hour, although they can run up to 57 km per hour for short distances.

To follow fresh spoor on foot takes time – it's impossible to read the track and run. Fortunately Benin is not hilly; it is mostly flat with vast open plains with a few small trees. So you can see very far and are able to spot animals - but they can also see you! So you have to be ready to crawl a long time to finalize an approach and be in position to shoot.

I think that on buffalo you have to be within 100 yards to deliver a fatal shot. Very few shots, regardless of calibre, will put a mature bull on the ground unless it hits the spine. If in a herd, the wounded animal will break away. Buffalo are one of the only animals that purposefully circle back onto their own trail to 'hunt' the pursuer. Usually they will circle back on their trail near an anthill, fallen tree, or any area that provides decent cover. This time, having used

both a .338 Win and a .375 H&H on buff, I decided to try a .458 Win – definitely a heavier bullet, whether soft point or solid.

I've been through many discussions on what type of bullet to shoot, and personally believe it's very simple. Bullets that penetrate too well also tend to pass through animals without causing much damage. A gun that just makes neat little holes is only useful for target practice; what is needed on big game is a controlled way for a bullet to penetrate and then release all of its energy inside the animal. That is why a soft point bullet with a lead tip is used for body shots where damage and fragmentation are the primary concerns for species like buffalo. A solid has no expansion upon impact – only high penetration, and I use them only for headshots.

A heavier bullet also means a heavier gun. I have to say that some days during a long walk in the bush, I wished I had something lighter on my shoulder, but never regretted the final result.

We decided to follow the track as we estimated that it was less than an hour old, and that it was from a small herd of five to six animals. I followed the tracker, trying to read the evidence – not only the foot prints because from time to time the ground was so hard that there were none, but also the nibbled tufts of grass, broken tree branches, chewed leaves, and dung. During the day groups of buffalo just walk around in a certain direction and stop from time to time to enjoy a quiet graze.

After two hours of tracking, the temperature was quite high, and normally the animals would slow down. We could see they were looking

for shade, as they stopped regularly and more often in shadowy places. We were definitely catching up on them, confirmed when we found still-warm dung.

A few minutes later, we caught sight of the herd at 300 yards in the middle of a grassy plain, and started to study them through binoculars. There was definitely a big old bull among them. But even bigger was the difficulty that, apart from one small bush, there was nothing to hide us to get closer. So the tracker and I started to crawl slowly towards them, pausing every time one of the buffalos stopped eating and raised its head to have a look around. It took us more than an hour to get to within 60 yards of them. We were in a good position, having the bull in side-view.

Lying down, I put my elbows on the ground and aimed the barrel at the bull's shoulder. I made sure that it was high enough so that the bullet would not hit any grass and be deviated. I took a long breath, stabilized the barrel, and squeezed the trigger. When you hunt buffalo you have to be conscious that as soon you shoot, you are responsible for declaring war! And no one has any certainty who will be the winner out of the belligerent parties.

However, I knew I'd made a good shot as I heard the bullet impact and could see immediately the nostril flooded by blood. The bull stayed a few seconds as if petrified. The others ran away, leaving the frozen bull behind. For sure it didn't understand what was going on, and didn't have time to find the answer as I had reloaded my gun and shot again. Even if the first bullet hadn't done its job, the second one hit him again. The tremendous impact put the bull on the ground.

I waited a few minutes. It's not wise to go immediately for verification. Even if mortally wounded but still alive, buffalo like nothing more than charging. Five minutes passed, and when we didn't hear anything we stood up and walked towards the fallen animal, making sure that we approached it from behind. But he was definitely dead. Both bullets had hit the shoulder, doing fatal damage in the heart area.

I went back several times to that part of Benin, and the hunting is still the same. The only difference is that nowadays a PH takes hunters hunting. But there is still the same pleasure of tracking a dangerous animal in the heat of day in mixed cover.

Bertrand de Courcy heads a management consulting group in France, but also advises hunters on destinations in Europe and Africa. He has hunted extensively in Africa since 1975, especially West Africa, and in Rwanda where, unfortunately, hunting is closed.



Photo courtesy of Club Faune

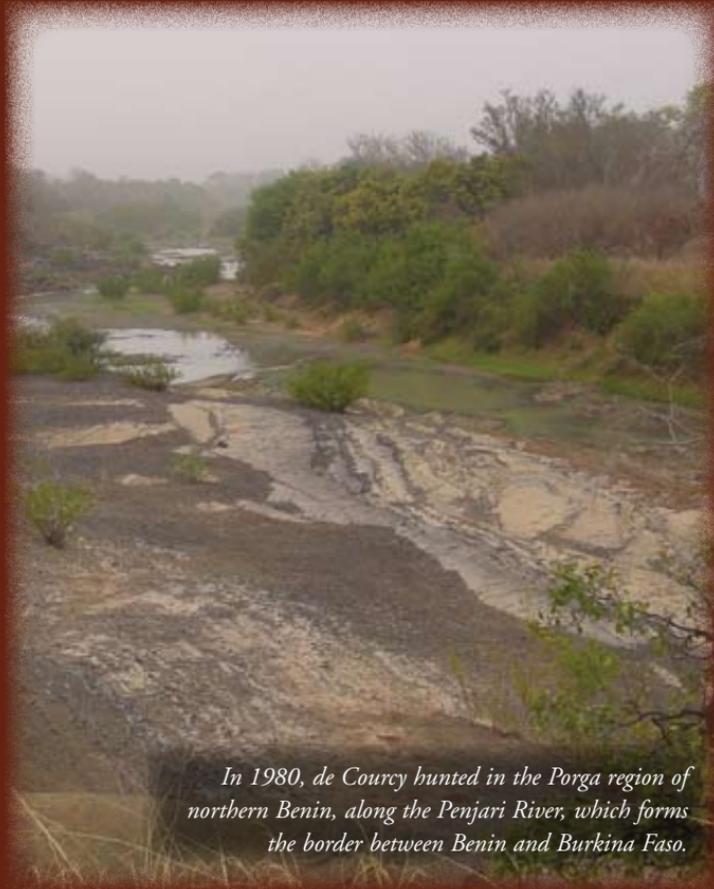
Bertrand de Courcy took his buffalo back in the old days when there were no PHs, and the hunter went it alone, with only a local tracker as back-up.



Benin: 1980



Bertrand de Courcy hunted buffalo in Benin in the days before an organized safari industry with permanent camps and PHs. Today, outfitters like Club Faune, offer another standard of comfort.



In 1980, de Courcy hunted in the Porga region of northern Benin, along the Penjari River, which forms the border between Benin and Burkina Faso.