



The end of the quest: PH and outfitter Mark Haldane, in coastal Mozambique with the kind of nyala Boddington had been looking for. Most hunters would probably be luckier; nyala are again plentiful and bulls like this aren't uncommon—but they take some looking...and this animal is worth the effort!

A Big Mozambique Nyala – At Long Last

Last month I wrote about how, thanks to hunting, wildlife is flourishing in Mozambique's Zambezi Delta. What I didn't write about is exactly why I was there. There are several reasons. It's great to get into the big buffalo herds out in the swamps, and it's awesome to be in wild Africa, where you never know what you might see. But my hunting dreams—and plans—are fairly organized, and I usually have a specific reason to spend time in a particular place.

For the past several years, the nyala has been my primary excuse to return to coastal Mozambique. The nyala—from Zulu, "the shifty one"—is one of Africa's most colorful and beautiful animals, with a long chocolate coat offset by white spots and stripes and burnt orange on the legs. As a full-fledged member of the spiral-horned tribe he's cover-loving, elusive, and challenging; his lyre-shaped horns are magnificent. But, hey, he's widespread and fairly plentiful in South Africa, and over the years I've shot good ones there. So why Mozambique?

Well, that's just me. In the 1960s and early '70s, before my time and before South Africa's safari industry really got going, Mozambique was *the* place to hunt nyala. Africa is a huge continent holding an immense variety of game. There will always be spots I've missed and species I haven't hunted, but I've hunted most of the common game in the more popular areas, and I keep looking for reasons to go back. I thought it would be a fine experience to take a big nyala in Mozambique—native range, free range, the most traditional place to hunt this animal.

What I didn't know is that it would turn into a major quest. That it did was my fault altogether. Hunting in Coutada 10 in 2008, I messed up really badly on a very



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big nyala. Since then, the hunt has been on. A bit of research uncovered that Mark Haldane, hunting Coutadas 11 and 12, had the largest quota for nyala and the largest amount of likely habitat, so I tried there in 2009. We were fairly late in the year, when the waters have receded and the nyala are coming to the pans, but it was unseasonably cool and we didn't see a whole bunch. That said, we passed some bulls we should have passed...and a

couple we should have taken. Late in the hunt I took a decent bull, but not the best we'd looked at. In 2010, I hunted Toni Wickers' Coutada 14, awesome for buffalo, but with less habitat for plains game. I liked Haldane—and his area and operation—so we tried again in 2011. Donna shot a beautiful nyala, but despite considerable searching I never saw the monster I was looking for.

This brings us to 2012. I'm hard pressed to explain the difference. It was about the same time of year, late October, theoretically the best time for nyala. It was hot, but not blistering. The only two differences I can offer are that we caught the dark of the moon, which makes a major difference with some animals and not others; and maybe this time my luck turned! Most antelope species were extremely visible...and the nyala were on parade.

There is another difference: This time I spent more time concentrating on nyala, always the best way to see what you're looking for! In Mozambique they're hunted quite a bit differently than in South Africa, and differently from most antelope in most areas. Yes, you might just encounter one. Mel Zeman, hunting with veteran PH Craigh Hamman, shot a plus-30-incher a half-hour from camp on the first morning. That's the kind of nyala I'd

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been looking for, and I haven't had that kind of luck! It happens, but isn't all that likely because the cover is thick and the country is huge. The nyala do come to the pans, slight open depressions that collect water and grow succulent tidbits. The hotter it gets and the more the water dries up the more reliably they come, which is why nyala hunting is better late in the season—they become generally more visible, but you have to let them come to you.

This means waiting at the pans. Whether nyala, whitetail or leopard, waiting isn't my favorite kind of hunting. I hate to sit still. But I've learned and fully accept that this method offers the best odds. That's what we did when I messed up in 2008, and that's what we did when I took a nyala in 2009, and that's how Donna took her nyala in 2011. So the waiting game works. The afternoon is considered most likely, but in this dark-of-the-moon period we discovered early that the nyala were hitting the pans randomly, and at any time of day. So I spent mornings, afternoons, and entire days sitting over pans.

I won't call it boring. I saw lots of nyala, and to spice things up I saw eland, sable, zebra, bushbuck, hartebeest, oribi, red duiker, and tons of warthogs. Sitting isn't my thing, so I took breaks to hunt buffalo in the swamps, hunt zebra on the floodplains, and make sure I was with Kelly McMillan when he took his sable. But I sat a lot—and I saw a lot of nyala. On one exceptional day, I lost count at 35 bulls, all sizes, a great tribute to how Mozambique's wildlife has recovered... and also a testament to hunting them at the right time in the right way.

Despite this amazing plenty, I didn't shoot one that day. At midmorning the biggest bull in a group of nine clearly made the grade—he was huge—but his horns were straight up, not the in-and-out configuration I was looking for. Okay, I'll be more honest. I really wanted that classic lyre shape...but I also wanted length, the "30-inch horns" that are the Holy Grail for nyala. On the third afternoon, stalking a pan, we intercepted a gorgeous bull with the right horn length, but a more open shape. We shot him.

But here's the deal: Other than a Selous

zebra, which I took the next day, I have everything else from that part of Africa, and I really wanted a big nyala. Mark Haldane's Zambeze Delta Safaris has a huge nyala quota—no surprise if, at the right time, you can see dozens in a single day—but since sightings are much less frequent until late in the season, it's a quota that is hard to fill. So I guess you could call it insurance, or maybe frustration after four safaris of looking for such a bull...but this one had it all, except the shape wasn't perfect. So, rarely, I had the amazing luxury to keep looking, with no pressure. I kept looking. Some days we tried the mornings, other days the afternoons, still others the midday hours. Movement was extremely random, which I attribute to dark-of-the-moon, and it was hard to catch them...but my patience level couldn't handle more than a couple of all-day sits, which is undoubtedly the tactic that was called for.

Then there's this: The pans often occur in series. Some are bigger than others, and some look better than others...but movement is random enough that you can guess right or wrong. So, at what seems to be peak movement, you can keep moving, getting the wind right and stalking one pan after another in sequence. Maybe you catch them and maybe you don't...but the same applies to picking one pan over several others. So it was that, on the next-to-last day, Mark Haldane and I approached a pan where I'd seen a lot of activity, but at random times of the day, so random that we couldn't figure it out.

This time we intended to hit it at first light, but we got sidetracked on the way. It was still early, maybe an hour after dawn, and as we approached we saw a group of bulls already leaving. Haldane and I rushed forward, circling just a bit to get ahead of them, and we intercepted them in open bush just before the thick stuff. By now, and long since, Mark knew exactly what we were looking for—and I understood that. So when he set up the sticks and told me to shoot the third bull, I never looked at the horns. I could see only the top third of the animal, so I knew it would be a top-of-shoulder spine shot, and I knew the nyala would drop to the shot—and hopefully stay down. So when the McMillan .300 went off and the bull dropped, Mark and

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I ran forward quickly...and only then did I see the horns. Heavy bases, pinched in at the upper third, long ivory tips flaring outward...and all the length I'd spent five years searching for. At long last the search was over. But I love this area, my new and favorite African hunting ground...and I'm sure I can find another reason to return.