

## THE CAPE BUFFALO COMMANDS RESPECT



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

*This column is part of an ongoing series that will appear monthly. Many aspects of Africa, wildlife, culture, and safari life will be covered here, along with a few hunting tales along the way.*

The Professional Hunter, sometime called Bwana or PH, pointed out some tracks crossing an old elephant trail. “These tracks are just what we are looking for, five bull buffalo, all old and large, called dugga boys. These tracks are from this morning, and we shall follow them,” said Lance Nesbitt, our PH.

Follow them we did. The two trackers walked us for four hours, over grass, leaves, rocks, fallen trees, brush, and everything in between. The heat was searing, and the sweat poured off of us as we followed.

I thought it impossible that the trackers, named Anymore and Pardon, (their American names), could possibly track anything so long. I forgot what we were looking for after five miles.

The tracks led to a water hole, and the PH explained that the dugga boys drank, and were heading for shade to lay up for the day. Follow the trackers for another hour, and suddenly, it got very real. The trackers slipped back, and the PH had me crawl forward. For-



My Cape buffalo from our recent trip to Zimbabwe. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

ty yards in front of us was a group of five dugga boys, bedded down in the shade. Game on.

The African cape buffalo, Syncerus caffer, or Inyati in Shona, has always been considered a top contender for the African continent’s most dangerous animal. His package of tricks includes characteristics that in total, are unequalled by any other member of the big five.

He can read an obituary in dim light from a hundred yards, he hears better than lions or leopards, he outweighs them by hundreds of pounds, and brings blinding speed and maneuverability to the party.

Between the monster set of horns on his head to the hooves that support a ton of bulk, he can roll you into a fair resemblance of a toll house cookie mix, identifiable only by dental records.

Both male and female have heavy, ridged horns that grow straight out from the head or curve downward and then up. The buffalo vary in size and color, usually black or dark gray. Sometimes they

are red because they spend time wallowing in the mud of that color because of the iron presence in the soil.

What the Cape buffalo is known for is his malevolent stare. His eyes penetrate your existence, and he hates your guts, you can just feel it. On the African continent, he is known as the black death or the widow maker, and that stare tells you he knows it and you had best watch out.

Cape buffalo are herbivorous, eating as much as 40 pounds a day of grasses and other plants on the savannah. In the wild, they can live as long as 22 years. Standing 5 feet tall at the shoulder and tipping the scales at 2,000 pounds for an old bull not counting his calories, the Inyati is a powerhouse.

Outside of African national parks, these giants are considered crop pests, raiding crops, demolishing fences, and even capable of spreading diseases to domestic livestock. During the great rinderpest epidemic of the 1890s, coupled with pleuro-pneumonia, the mortality rate of the Cape buffalo was

95 percent, but they are resilient creatures, and today, they number close to a million worldwide.

On a normal day, a herd of Inyati will move away at the first scent or sight of you. For the most part, they are docile and will leave you alone. The danger comes when you wound one. When you hunt one, you had best be sure of your shot, because if you flinch or are off the mark by just a little bit, better batten down the hatches because friend, you have a problem.

Wounded buffalo kill better than 200 people a year. The problem is adrenaline pumped by a super-sized heart. When wounded, the buffalo is the world champ in the overdrive department. Wound him and he will get the idea that he is unstoppable and may strive to prove that point to you over the next few minutes as he attempts to rearrange your landscape.

A wounded buffalo is such a danger that Africa requires the PH to follow up the animal, lest the buff go on a killing rampage. Any wounded buff that is not properly dispatched on

follow up must be reported to the game department officials, and they will assist in the finding of the animal. Serious business.

The Cape buffalo lives in the really thick stuff, scrub brush loaded with thorns. Visibility in this terrain is often measured in feet and inches, rather than yards. A wounded buff that heads to the thick stuff will need to be sorted out, and chances are, you are the one getting sorted. He will lay up in an ambush point for the unsuspecting hunter to walk out, and immediately begin the festivities.

The problem for the average hunter or tourist comes when you stumble on a buffalo that was wounded, and not by you. Poachers often use very primitive rifles, and lacking quality ammunition, will put a slug in a buff and don’t follow it up. The buffalo, laying in the brush with a terrible gut ache and a bad attitude, will take it out on the next thing that happens down the trail, and that might be you.

The only real natural enemy of the Cape buffalo is the lion. There seem to

be lions that specialize in the taking of buffalo, but they are pretty few and far between. There is so much easier prey for a lion that a buff seems like a bad idea.

Young calves are not as easy for a lion as you would think because mom and dad are nearby. Watch a YouTube video of a buffalo fighting off lions sometime and you will get the idea.

The buff with the bad attitude may have had a scrape with a lion, and is nursing some wounds, when you come strolling down the path. Again, buckle up, because the ride will be at close distance, and be over with quickly, usually with the person on the losing end.

When I crawled up on the herd of five dugga boys, one of them stared at me, and I remembered the words of Robert Ruark, “He looked at me as if he hated my guts. He looked at me as if I despoiled his fiancée, murdered his mother, and burned down his house. He looked at me as if I owed him money. I never saw such malevolence in the eyes of any animal or human being, before or since.”

And he was right. I saw it too. Long live the Inyati.

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## Some botanical plants are spooktacular



### Gardening From A to Z

By Linda Corwine McIntosh

Did you really think with “Little Shop of Horrors” playing at the Magic Circle Theater at Halloween time that I could resist writing about carnivorous plants? I won’t give it away, but in case you don’t know, the play, or movie, is about a carnivorous plant. (And the play is fantastic!)

Believe it or not, so many people have discovered the intriguing world of carnivorous plants that there are carnivorous plant societies, including the International Carnivorous Plant Society.

I know, you’re probably thinking, why would I want such a creepy plant in my home? So read on. Some of them actually have flowers that resemble orchids, lilies, and violets. Some have interesting shapes or blossoms that the plant uses as a “trap” to snare those pesky flies

or fungus gnats in your home. Now doesn’t that sound like a good thing?

Most carnivorous plants are pretty easy to grow as a houseplant. They generally prefer very bright light, like an east facing window, high humidity, temperatures above 40 degrees, and a proper mix of nutrient-poor growing medium; not potting soil.

That’s right, nutrient poor soil. A mix of 60% peat moss and 40% perlite, and a little sand if you wish, for a potting mix is recommended. In nature the marshy areas where they grow are very low in nutrients. So you want to try to mimic that.

They say the plants developed their carnivorous appetite as a way to meet their need for nutrients rather than relying on poor soil. In fact, you can actually kill your plant by fertilizing it. Watering them with distilled, reverse osmosis water, or rainwater is recommended.

If you’re one who frequently lets their houseplants get too dry these plants might not be for you. Setting them on a tray of pebbles with a little water will help increase the humidity around them and keep them happy. A greenhouse or terrarium will also keep them content.

A combination of carnivorous plants grown in a terrarium, or other clear container, is known as bog gardening. Some great plants to include in a bog garden are butterworts, Pinguicula vulgaris, which have pretty, colorful flowers. Sundews, Drosera species, can provide variety with a very delicate look, even though they’re killers.

The really scary thing about carnivorous plants is, while they’re harmless to people, we’re not so harmless to them. The homes of many carnivorous plants are rapidly being destroyed by humans.

They’re not only being killed by pollution and development, but extremely rare species are occasionally stolen by collectors, even though stiff fines exist for illegal collecting. I’ve heard that some species have already become extinct due to people’s carelessness or love of the plants.

The common, yet mysterious, Venus flytraps Dionaea muscipula are native to North and South Carolina bogs and are not endangered. That’s good news because these plants are terrific plants for beginners, and kids love to feed them and watch what happens! I can’t think of a better time than Halloween to try your hand

at growing one. Trust me, they won’t bite the hand that feeds them.

During the winter months, November through April, flytraps will go dormant and will not eat. Much, if not all of the foliage, could die during this time. The good part about this is if your plant isn’t in a terrarium, you can remove the soil from the plant, treat it with a fungicide, wrap it in damp sphagnum moss, and place it in a plastic bag in a cool area. Then replant it when the growing season begins.

Pitcher plants are another common group of carnivorous plants that are pretty easy to grow. There are about 80 species of them. The purple Sarracenia purpurea, native to Canada, is one of those that will do well here.

Their care is similar to flytraps. Keep in mind, the plants prefer small insects and will probably not consume more than one insect a week. Feeding them too much, or insects that are too large, will cause the trap to become black. (Any black traps on the plants should be cut off.)

If you would like to feed the plant, a great way to provide a gourmet meal is to catch a small insect, place it in a container, and set it in the refrigerator a few minutes until the



This carnivorous purple Sarracenia purpurea could best be described as bizarre, intriguing, unusual, and fun. (Linda Corwine McIntosh/Special to the MDP)

insect is no longer real active. It can then be gently placed into the trap.

Whatever you do, don’t feed your plant hamburger or other processed meat! If you prefer to let your plant catch its own food and not feed it, it will be fine. In fact, it can live for about a year without food it will just grow a little slower.

If the craving for carnivorous plants has bitten you, as it has me, just do a web search for “carnivorous plants.” You’ll be

surprised how much information is available. You can find information on growing great carnivorous plants and the answers to almost any question that you have about them.

I think you just might enjoy the weird and wonderful world of these fascinating botanical carnivores. I think these unusual plants can be fun!

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