

# Keeping track of the kudu



## 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.

Ernest Hemingway’s famous book, *Green Hills of Africa*, is the story of his personal safari, focused primarily on his quest to take a trophy Kudu. Throughout the book, you are held in suspense as he comes so close, several times over many days. You have to read the book to find out how the kudu chase went.

In 1952, Robert Ruark took his first safari, and wrote his book *Horn of the Hunter*. Ruark took lion, buffalo, elephant, leopard, but devoted most of his time to the pursuit of the kudu, and never got one.

The greater kudu, pronounced *koodoo*, has the scientific name of *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*, in case you were wondering. On the streets of Africa, he is called lazima. To us hunters, he is the most recognized member of the African antelope. For safari seekers, he is usually at the top of the wish list. Just seeing one in the wild is an accomplish-



Easy to see why he is considered the most beautiful antelope in the world. (Courtesy photo/Hans Hillewaert)

ment. They aren’t called the *grey ghost* by accident.

The kudu loves the thickest, nastiest, thorniest cover. He moves only at dawn and dusk, usually near water, but push him, and he will become nocturnal. He has the keenest eyesight, unbelievable hearing, a sense of smell that can reach a mile or more and can run up to 60 mph when he needs to.

The greater kudu can stand just over 5 feet at the shoulder, and weigh in over 750 pounds, if he is not counting his calories. They have a smooth coat, coloring from a tan-gray to a blue gray. Their bodies have numerous white markings,

including up to 10 vertical stripes along the sides, and a chevron between the eyes and cheek spots. All kudus have an upright mane from the top of the head to the shoulders and extending underneath along the throat.

Throw into the description a bushy tail with a patch of white on the underside. When a kudu is alarmed, the tail will curl up over the back, so the white underside is showing, serving as a visual alarm for the rest of the herd to follow into dense brush.

The most phenomenal feature of the kudu would be on his head, above a

set of very large ears. He has the most spectacular horns in all of the animal kingdom. They are thick, walnut-colored horns that twist around a keel, making two complete turns by maturity, and ending with beautiful polished ivory tips.

Greater kudu are measured from base of the horn to the tip, by following around the spiral: 45 inches is a mature trophy; 50 inches is fantastic; 55 inches and above is once in a lifetime. The world record measured just over 75 inches, but kudu over 55 inches is very rare.

There is a story bouncing around about how Mussolini greatly admired a trophy head, hanging on the wall in the dining room at Hemingway’s Finca Vigia. Mussolini so “had to have it” that he sent Hemingway a blank check and told him to write in whatever amount he would like for that trophy. The trophy of course, was a kudu that Hem shot while on safari in Tanganyika in 1934.

Hemingway was no fan of Mussolini, and in a 1923 article that appeared in the *Toronto Daily Star*, penned by Hemingway, called Mussolini, “the biggest Buff in Europe.” When Hemingway received the fascist dictator’s check, he wrote on it, “Shoot your own” and mailed it back.

The kudu rarely uses those fabulous horns in self-defense, but occasionally against predators. The horns are not an impediment while moving through the dense bush, as he will tilt his chin up and lay the horns against his back, allowing him to pass through quickly, silently, and easily.

A kudu will emit a raspy, gruff bark when disturbed, the loudest of any of the antelope. Amazingly, a kudu will slip through the driest brush, with leaves and twigs all over the ground, and not make a sound.

If you were to look at a kudu bull from the top down, sighting in the spiral of his horns, you will see his eye in the center of the opening. A mature bull can look up, through the horns, and see the ivory tip, knowing exactly where this tip is as he moves through the brush.

Their numbers are doing pretty well, almost reaching 500,000 in the wild. Kudu will reach up to 15 years of age in the wild, with their main enemy being predators, like the lion. If they can stay away from Simba, who usually hunts them near water holes, the kudu has little to worry about.

My own experience with kudu was similar to everyone else’s. He was near the top of my list. We hunted buffalo for the first few

days, and saw a few kudu bulls, mostly young and with females. Any decent sized bull you only saw for a split second, as he vaporized into the surrounding brush.

After the buff, we pursued a kudu in earnest. Eight straight days we did not see a mature bull. Some days we saw cows, and some days we did not see any kudu at all. I had decided that eight days was enough, but my Professional Hunter, Lance Nesbitt, insisted “one more day.”

And one more day it was, as a trophy bull finally appeared, following five cows across an elephant trail, and the rest is history. Mine measured 55 inches and I could not be prouder of any animal that I harvested in my lifetime.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. Personal email is [elkhunter77@icloud.com](mailto:elkhunter77@icloud.com). For information about the posse, call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email [info@mcspi.org](mailto:info@mcspi.org)

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Sight down the center of the spiral of those giant horns and you can see the eye. The kudu bull always knows where the tips of his horns are. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)