Just a Giraffe, I Guess!

By Tom Murphy

What was to happen next was that me and the giraffe were going to get a lot closer, then see what the Smith & Wesson could do. It was full of Hornady’s 500 grain XTP rounds that left the muzzle at 1425 fps and packed over 2200 ft-lbs of energy. A lot of power for a handgun, yes. But to take down an animal that stands over 18 feet tall and go a ton meant that the shot would have to be under seventy-five yards to really be effective. At that range, the bullet would be travelling at 1220 fps and carrying near 1800 ft-lb of energy. Maybe I should have brought my Ruger .458 Mag? Oh well, no one ever said I did things the smart way.

My brother Sean, my nephew PJ and I were in South Africa.

Tall? I’ll give you tall! The nearby trees were 10-15 feet high and his head and half his neck cleared the uppermost branches. I was impressed. I was also a scosh nervous as I am only 5’-10” and he looked to outweigh me by at least 1800lbs. Plus, I didn’t even have a rifle, just a handgun. And it was only a five-shot. ‘Course it was a Smith & Wesson 500 Magnum, but still…

Three young giraffe stopped to stare at the loud, noisy thing with people in it. This is a fairly unusual photo as usually the giraffe will be almost out of sight before you can get your camera up. I don’t think these three had ever seen a hunting truck before.
on a plains game hunt in June of 2006. We were up in the Northern Province on the Limpopo river hunting with Dumukwa Safaris (www.dumukwa.com) when all this silliness happened. Those two had already hunted kudu, zebra, impala and gemsbuck while I took photos. I hadn’t figured on shooting anything until we went to Zimbabwe where I planned to reduce the Cape buffalo population by one. The idea of hunting something as big as a giraffe didn’t even cross my mind until the third day of the hunt when we were driving around checking tracks.

We rounded a corner, so to speak, and there were three giraffe standing not forty yards in front of us. I don’t know who was more surprised, us, or the 12-ft tall mammals off our right bumper? I know my mouth hung open. This was the first time I’d seen a giraffe without bars and a zoo employee nearby. We shot photos, then sat while they slowly wandered off.

I asked my PH, Peter, if giraffe had ever been seriously hunted. I know they aren’t in any record books, at least not in the Safari Club International book, so there’s no set standard to judge one by. I just knew that I wanted one, but wasn’t totally sure about using a handgun to take it.

“Tom,” said Peter. “These three are much too young and small, but I think I know of an area that has a very old, very tall giraffe, so old he’s chocolate brown and black. Oh, and he’s at least five feet taller than the three we just saw. If you’re interested I could make a call or two.”

“Sure!” I made up my mind that second. A chance to take a 17-foot tall giraffe with my handgun sounded very interesting, to say the least.

“Ok, I’ll call the other ranch and we’ll know by tonight.”

Did I REALLY want to use a handgun on an animal that weighed in at 2000+ pounds?

Yes!

That night we relaxed around the lodge while some phone calls were made. I was getting more nervous by the hour. I wasn’t worried about the gun’s stopping power so much as my abilities. The gun would be ok. I’d already seen what it could do. I had shot a 235lb feral pig with the .500 a few months back. The 500 grain soft-point entered on the left shoulder, exited on the right, leaving a fifty-cent size hole, and went zinging off into the brush. I actually saw the slug ricochet off a boulder some yards behind the pig. He travelled exactly zero feet. The gun? No problem. Me? Good question.

Around eight thirty Peter came over to where I was sitting in front of the campfire.

“Tom, you better head for bed. You’re going giraffe hunting in the morning.”

Off I went to a good night’s sleep.

They are called “wait-a-bit” thorns with good reason. Walk into the bush and they will slide into you like a #28 hypodermic needle. Try to back out and they hold you like an aggravated pit bull. The holes they leave only take 2-3 weeks to heal, though.

This gives you an idea of the relative size of an old adult giraffe. I’m not small, but he’s immense. We could only estimate his weight as 2000+ pounds.
than fifty feet. Above that, trees were everywhere. Plus, the ‘wait-a-bit’ thorns went through my hunting shirt and into my epidermis like a #28 hypodermic needle. We were a couple of hours into the hunt and had seen nothing when the radio blasted. The other truck had spotted him! He was about four miles behind us. Time to do a 180 and go!

It took about thirty minutes to hook up with the other hunting rig. We left the trucks and headed into the bush to try to run down the giraffe. I was looking in front of me and seeing only bush. Only later did I realize that should I actually see the animal, all that would be in view would be his knees. Lucky for me, Peter had a much better grasp of the situation and a quick grab of my shirt brought me to a halt.

Lord love a duck! The giraffe was off to the left and no more than fifty yards in front of us. I still didn’t see him until Peter pointed up…and up…and up some more. The giraffe’s head towered above the surrounding trees. Impressive? Nothing like a head the size of a human torso looking down at you to make you understand real humility.

I don’t know exactly how smart a giraffe is, but this one was smart enough to execute a right face and exit the area. He was amazing to watch. His body rocked back and forth like a spotted pendulum as he took three strides and was out of sight. Now we had to move, and fast. Well, I’m not built like any professional hunter you’ve ever met. My running days are long over, and a fondness for spirits of an alcoholic sort have ensured that I stay firmly attached to the ground, which meant two trackers went after the animal and Peter and the rest of us went back to the trucks.

Following an animal that was taller than all the nearby trees shouldn’t be too hard, should it? Well…my last name’s Murphy, y’know. Two very tough hours shuffled off the clock while we played “chase-the-giraffe.” He’d run three to four hundred yards, then stop and watch us close to a hundred-and-fifty yards. Then it was off again for another three hundred and play the game again. It rapidly dawned on us that chasing just wasn’t going to work, and sneaking up by foot on something that could watch us coming probably wasn’t going to work either.

We split up. Myself, Peter and one tracker would take the truck and try to get in front of the giraffe while the others would push him towards us.

We took off on a tangent and extended out approximately one-half mile before cutting back to intercept the giraffe’s line of travel. He’d been leading us in large counterclockwise circles so we hung off to one side and hoped we could cut him off.

We neither heard or saw him approach. One second there were three humans looking around; next second a giraffe is looking at us looking for him. I, being cool of demeanor and a true, ice-cold
professional, didn’t jump more than 1-2 feet straight up. And, of course, my heart beat stayed at a low rate (yeah, sure).

Deep breath time. My revolver was still in my shoulder holster and I had my hat in my right hand. I started to put on the hat, pull out the gun, check that the AimPoint was turned on, turn to face the animal, take a deep breath, lift the revolver, check the AimPoint again and … Well, you get the picture. I accomplished about none of these before the massive head turned and was gone again.

We took off after him, but instead of heading in his direction, we worked inside the circle we thought he’d take. We heard him move along about 125 yards out. Then everything got quiet.

“He’s stopped to search for us,” whispered Peter. “Go left, but go slowly; very slowly. Let’s get where he can’t spot us.” We slid from one small tree to the next, one quiet step at a time. Peter told me later that the giraffe would wait until it saw us before moving out again, and that if we could blind side him, we stood a good chance of getting a shot.

So we crept and stopped, crept and stopped. Then Peter froze. There was a small clearing in front of us and the giraffe was standing right at the far edge. He hadn’t seen us, but was looking in the general direction. Peter’s hand left bruises on my forearm as he pulled me forward. This was where we would have to shoot. Estimated distance? Minimum 125 yards. Much too far for a handgun.

This is the place where normally the intrepid writer/hunter usually goes off on a tangent to talk about his gun, the type of animal, the terrain, or some such, leaving the reader wondering what the…? However, I was way too wound up to digress, so let’s continue.

Well, we waited. I had a good sight picture, but still too bloody far away. Then the giraffe’s head turned and he looked behind him. He must have heard the other truck. He took a tentative step, then another. Then he began walking on an oblique angle that would have him pass about 60 yards in front of us — no closer.

I took a good rest on a tree branch and waited. There wasn’t
No more than 50 yards separated us from him, and he was facing me. I bailed out of the truck and moved back to a small stand of trees. There was a horizontal branch that would support the gun. The giraffe was watching the truck, not me. I eased the hammer back and put the red dot two feet below his jaw. I put pressure on the trigger.

Again, BOOM!
I couldn’t see the impact, but the giraffe dropped from sight as if his strings were cut.

We approached. He was facing away from me, and the only sign of life was a slightly twitching left leg. That soon stopped and Peter touched his eye with the barrel of his .404 Jeffery. The hunt was over. The 500 grain bullet had entered the neck just to the right of centre. We later recovered the bullet in pieces and saw where a major chunk had shattered the spine while a small piece of jacket had cut the jugular in half. Neither of the other two bullets were recovered.

How did I feel at the moment? I’d like to have an easy answer, but there isn’t one. I felt good that I had taken the animal, sad because his life was ended, but overall, just a sense of wonderment at the size of the giraffe. When we got it to the skinning shed, via a tractor and 15-foot trailer, the head Skinner estimated its height between 18 feet and 18 feet, six inches. The only way they could set it up for skinning was by using a two-ton electric hoist. This was a big animal. Also an old one. His tail hairs had turned almost translucent and his teeth were worn down. Peter said he wouldn’t have lasted very much longer and when he fell, the hyenas would eat him while alive. It would take days for him to die. Better that he went this way.

The meat would be left with the rancher and used to feed his workers, or dried and kept as biltong (jerky). I was offered a small steak (two feet by as long as I wanted), but declined when told it might be a tad tough and more than gamey. I’ll stick with cow, thank you.

It will take 3-4 months for the hide to clear customs and show up at home in Nevada. I plan on a neck-up mount, about eight feet tall. My front room has a 12-ft ceiling, and there’s a nice corner behind the couch currently occupied by two goldfish where he will fit just fine. He’ll be looking over guest’s shoulders, but they’ll get used to it – I hope.

Hunting Tip - Giraffe are easily overlooked even at close proximity, because of their exceptional camouflage and height relative to surrounding bush. Become conditioned to looking above foliage, not into it. Old “stink-bulls” emit an offensive odour.