



Safari

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The American hunters' first stop in their South Africa safari was in Free State where they shot helmeted guineafowl. They hunted them like they would have hunted pheasant back home: in a field walk. But also hunted them using beaters to help push the birds into the air.



TAKING FLIGHT IN

A Waterfowl Hunter Spreads Her Wings



As we turned a corner on our safari in South Africa, there he stood. From the back of the truck, I saw the sun peeking through the clouds and shining right down upon the spiraled horns of a bull nyala.

I rushed to grab my rifle, steady it and get my sight on the bull as fast as I could. I took a deep breath in, let it out and pulled the trigger.

I watched the beast buck, but I wasn't sure I'd connected. My PH exclaimed with excitement, "You got him!" Exhilaration overcame me. I realized I was shaking like a leaf.

Before this day, I had never shot a rifle or had interest in game animals, like deer. In fact, I haven't been hunting that long. I'm what you'd call a late-onset hunter, a first-generation, female waterfowler.

I picked up wingshooting five years ago after I asked a friend who had been a collegiate competitor to teach me how to shoot skeet. That summer, we'd pay the clay fields a visit, and I learned everything I could about how to shoot a shotgun.

In the past, I was never invited to the dove hunts that all the guys would talk about. But then, another friend welcomed me to hunt public land with him. I fell for wingshooting, especially duck hunting, and found myself calling outfitters, asking if I could hop on as a solo hunter.

The last few years have been a combination of hunting public land in Central Texas and traveling the U.S. — 13 states so far, to hunt with different waterfowl outfitters. I'd show up with shotgun in hand and minimal experience but eager to learn. It was part of my newbie process. I believe you can do anything you set your mind to.

A few years ago, I learned about international duck hunts from a podcast called "Duck Season Somewhere" and its Instagram posts. Ramsey Russell hosts it and travels the world hunting waterfowl. For my first international hunt, I decided that South Africa, with its variety of hunting styles and game birds, would be right for me.

Shortly after I started hunting, I had to face and overcome a personal experience with bone cancer. The phrase "Tomorrow is never promised" now holds a special place in my heart. So, when a spot was open this past year on Ramsey's South Africa hunt, I didn't hesitate to book it.

I traveled halfway across the world by myself to meet up with Ramsey and a group of men I didn't know. I didn't quite imagine that the experiences I'd encounter would surmount my wildest expectations and fundamentally change me as a hunter.

VARIETY OF WINGS

We were dropped off at the edge of a corn field in Free State province. There were vast fields with stalk rows and reddish dirt. It reminded me of our Texas dove fields. Not knowing what dance was about to unfold, commotion and shouting could be heard in the distance. As the volume increased, I realized there were guys in the field beating drums to make noise. Next thing you know, a wave of black balls of feathers and beating wings popped up and out of the field, over my head, and I rushed to take shots.

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SOUTH AFRICA

BY AUSTIN ARIELLE COLLINS



Collins and the wingshooting party, led by Ramsey Russell, were not expecting to hunt big game. But the opportunity arrived to take a zebra and a nyala.

Our trip had kicked off with hunting for helmeted guineafowl. The guineas prefer to run on the ground than fly, but when pressured, they take flight and it's faster than you think. Standing on the edge of a field while the beaters pushed the birds was one way of hunting. But the other, my preferred way, was a driven field walk, similar to pheasant hunting.

We made our way to Mpumalanga in northeastern South Africa and transitioned from upland hunting to waterfowl. The Egyptian goose hunts were some of the most rewarding experiences because our harvest ended up in the hands of the locals.

Farmers welcome hunters like us because we help protect their crops from the damaging flocks of Egyptian and spur-winged geese. It was a win-win for farmer and hunter. The farmer protected his land and fed his workers from our harvest. The hunters got to hunt.

One particular property had no farmworkers so we took our harvest to a local village. Out of the sheet metal structures, their homes, came a family with a wheelbarrow and smiles on their faces.

"Baie Dankie," one woman sang joyously as she clapped her hands together in thanks. It was Afrikaans for "Thank you very much."

Our PH translated as we spoke with them to learn how they'd make use of the geese. They use the whole goose, boil it, bones and all, and reduce it down to a thick, unseasoned gravy in a communal pot. They add white corn grit balls to make a soup.

It was tough to drive by these townships and see the way many were living in shacks with no running water, electricity or plumbing. Yet, when we showed, they were grateful.

NOT OUR GAME PLAN

Halfway through the trip, our destination would be in KwaZulu-Natal. A number of the collector ducks in South Africa would be found in this part of the country:

pygmy goose, blue-billed teals, also called Hottentot teal, Cape teal and more.

Our trip was never intended to hunt big game. We were all duck hunters, but when an opportunity presented itself to hunt nyala, we jumped at the chance.

Harvesting my first large game animal was an incredible experience. After initially missing two opportunities, I found my nyala standing right in front of an umbrella acacia tree. The hit was a lung shot, and it ran maybe 20 yards.

We ended the hunt by smearing the blood of the antelope on my face, cheeks and forehead, a tradition many have experienced with their first game kill.

I wore it proudly to dinner that night. To me, it represented respect to my nyala and a badge of honor for my first big game kill. The nyala was the biggest of the day, beginner's luck, maybe. We experienced the South African barbecue called a braai, which provided us the opportunity to eat our nyala along with zebra, which both were absolutely delicious.

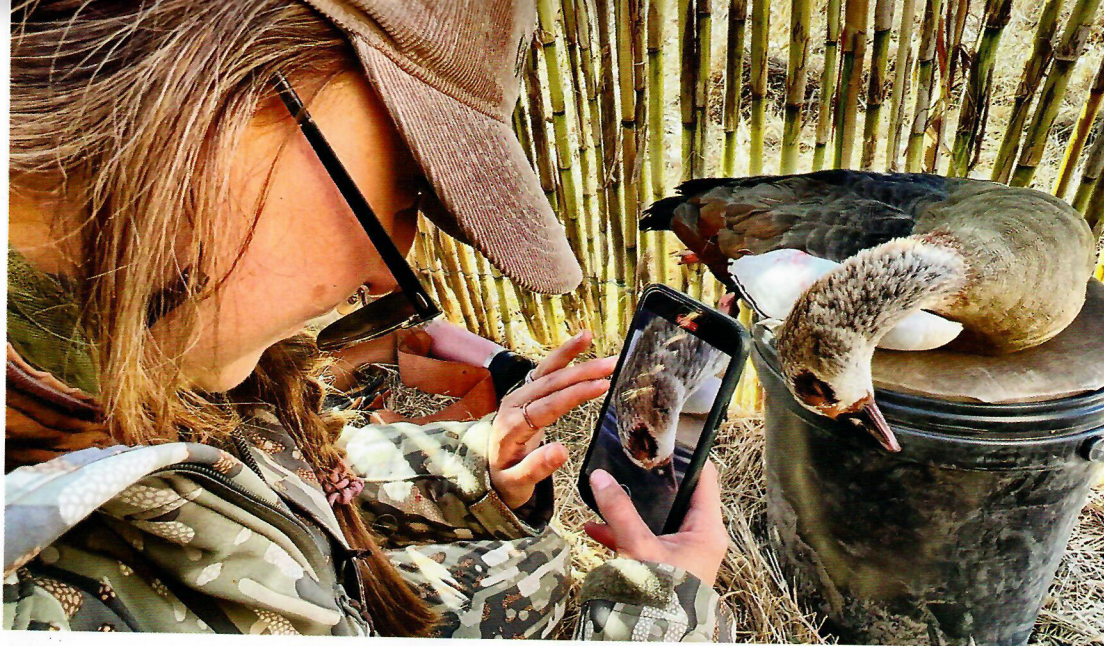
When the zebra from another hunter had come in that day, I admired its beauty. Yet I felt no connection to it like I thought I would, and was interested in taking my own zebra.

SOULFUL HARVEST

We came up on a herd about 100 yards away and I picked which zebra I'd target. But this time, as I pulled the trigger, I flinched, causing me to shoot low and miss my intended shot. I hit its knee while breaking the front leg. Devastated, that I didn't have a clean kill, I began to panic inside.



One of the most rewarding experiences for Collins was when they shared all of the Egyptian geese they shot with hungry, grateful locals in Mpumalanga.



Author Collins takes a photo of an Egyptian goose in northeastern South Africa.

We rushed to get closer, got set up on the sticks at 50 yards and the second shot took it down. Overcome with emotions, I began to weep tears of relief, excitement and sadness because I had added pain for this animal. I collected myself and, kneeling down, gave thanks for the harvest, praying and feeling its body all over. After taking photos for memories, we began to load it in the truck as the herd returned.

Three zebras had come back and watched. My mind now began to wonder what they were thinking. They looked at me and then towards the truck. I just kept saying in my head, "I'm sorry," as tears flowed down my face.

After the hunt, I was a bit melancholy and tried to cope with the emotions I had felt and understand what had happened. Because of my tears, emotions and sadness, I wondered if I was actually a hunter. Does this make me less of a hunter because I feel this way? Why didn't I feel like this with the nyala?

What brought comfort was having learned on the trip from our PHs how our hunting plays a crucial role in the sustainable use conservation of these animals. Without us hunting in South Africa, those herds would not exist.

A DANCE WITH THE LILIES

The day wasn't over yet, and I had to keep those emotions at bay because I was about to hunt pygmy geese – the one waterfowl I was determined to harvest.

Pygmy geese are one of the world's smallest waterfowl. They perch on lily pads and eat the seeds. They have bright green heads, but it's hard to identify them before they've spotted you. Similar to big game, this was a true spot-and-stalk hunt.

Passing fields of sugar cane, we went off-roading through thick mud. I wondered if our 4x4 Mahindra truck would make it out the other side. Luckily, we didn't get stuck and found a turn off to unload and launch our kayak into the marsh.

After spooking an initial pair we never had eyes on, we reached the spot my PH said they would be. Sure enough, there were seven. We were about 100 yards out and had to glass them with binoculars. Their heads are very small, but we tried to find the one in the bunch with the brightest, whitest cheek, indicating that it was an adult drake. They were

feeding and constantly moving and switching positions on the water.

Like big game hunting, we made and plan. We would attempt to keep our kayak hidden by a clump of reeds as we paddled closer. When we got to within about 50 yards, it was time. With one shot, my pattern spread just enough for a single pellet to take my drake down. The others flew away faster than you could blink.

That day was a roller coaster of emotions. From apprehension, anxiousness and failure to excitement, gratitude, appreciation and jubilation.

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Ramsey Russell of getducks.com and the "Duck Season Somewhere" podcast organized the successful hunt across South Africa.



ONCE IN A MILLION

After some incredible waterfowl and upland wing-shooting, harvesting big game for the first time ever, bagging the prized pygmy goose, you wouldn't think my South Africa safari journey could get any better. It did.

Similar to the pygmy goose, harvesting another collector's duck, the Hottentot Teal, also called blue-billed teal, would not include the use of decoys but rather another spot-and-stalk hunt because they hang out on the edge of the water banks.

A pair spotted us while hiding behind reeds, and I missed the shot! Thankfully, there was another pair farther along. Our guide was not sure that we could

get close enough because there was no cover. Our bird boy had faith and encouraged our PH to "give it a shot." I had to be ready because it was going to happen fast. Just like my nyala, I breathed in and out with a steady trigger pull. Bam! I hit the drake perfectly and the hen was collateral damage. I hit two with one shot.

Our bird boy went and picked them up and the hen was almost as beautiful as the drake. I was elated to be able to mount a pair of Hottentot teal, and with one shot. We began to take pictures with the pair and all of a sudden, I saw a band and squealed out loud, "It's banded!"

My guide said that his dad has been hunting ducks in South Africa since 1978 and has never seen a banded duck shot. I've never had a band, and my first one just happened to be in South Africa — a true once in a lifetime experience.

NO LONGER THE SAME

After seeing the variety of wings, emotional hunt experiences, first-hand how no harvested resource goes unused, and learning how South Africa hunting has a profound impact on wild game sustainable use conservation, I am a changed hunter. Through this experience, and a can-do attitude, late-onset hunters like me — women and men — can see a wonderful world of hunting and the outdoors. My goal now is to share my safari, my hunting journey, to educate hunters and non-hunters about the value of hunting as the primary way to achieve sustainable use wildlife conservation across the world.

Filled with gratitude, I hold a relationship with the outdoors like never before. 🐾

Austin Arielle Collins is a first-generation, female waterfowler who lives in Texas. Ramsey Russell is a longtime supporter of SCI and recently accepted the position of subchair of SCI's Gamebirds of the World. Visit him at Booth 336 at the SCI Convention.



Yellow bills and red bills were some of the many ducks they shot during their South Africa journey.