

field sports

Abrø J Steyn recalls a particularly difficult hunt on the Highveld – cold weather and a flat featureless landscape. What made it special, though, was that the quarry was a unique South African antelope and the weapon a unique, locally designed handgun.



ABOVE: The author, dressed in so many thick layers he could hardly move.

LEFT: The bontebok is the southern sub-species of the blesbok. It's slightly smaller, more colourful with more white, especially on the rump, and lives on fynbos.

BELOW: Blesbok graze exclusively on grass and have the strange habit of sleeping in daytime while standing, their heads hanging down. Although attractive and in demand by foreign hunters, they're duller in colour than the bontebok.



UNIQUELY SOUTH AFRICAN

THE ICY WIND CUT THROUGH FLESH and bone. I was shivering, although I was dressed in so many thick layers, I could hardly move. My nose had lost all feeling as had my fingers and toes, despite gloves and a double pair of socks. It was the middle of May and a freezing wind sweeping across the Highveld had been blowing for days. When I saw the large herd of blesbok on the horizon across the river, any hope I still had of hunting them vanished. Unable to walk, there was no way I could get there but on hands and knees, as my bike couldn't cross the river.

I was hunting on the farm of Machiel Kok, near Ermelo. Apart from other Highveld game, he had one of the largest herds of blesbok I'd ever seen – almost 800. A small stream in a deep ravine filled with huge black boulders bisected the farm and sliced

through the veld. It was the upper reaches of the Vaal River. The veld was flat, with not a tree in sight and the blesbok could spot you for miles. The hunt was going to be tough.

I knew the wind would make the blesbok skittish as it affected their ability to smell. What I didn't know was how it would affect my shooting, and what a 45km/h crosswind could do to the flight path of a bullet. I was, however, determined to find out but, unable to keep the gun still, I waited until midday to fire some test shots to determine the effect of the wind.

Some hunters sneer at the blesbok as a hunting quarry. I don't. Under the right circumstances, blesbok which are not used to being approached can be very difficult to hunt. This uniquely South African antelope's natural habitat is the wide open spaces of the grasslands of Gauteng, the

Free State and Eastern Cape. Long ago, they must've occurred throughout the Karoo right to Africa's southern tip, but when conditions became unfavourable a gap developed in their distribution, which was filled by springbuck.

Blesbok can endure extreme weather conditions without needing shelter. When it rains or a cold wind blows, they turn their backs to it, and when it's hot they face the sun. The blesbok is the only antelope with a white blaze on its forehead and there's a fine network of capillaries under the skin of this area. The blaze reflects the sun's rays and helps cool their blood. As they belong to the hartebeest group, we can assume that they, more than any other antelope, have been influenced by the cheetah, which originally favoured the same habitat. Fleeing from cheetahs made them one of the

