

PH Spotlight

Brian Van Blerk

Brian van Blerk was born in Zimbabwe in 1971, and raised on his father's game ranch. With access to wildlife and guns at his disposal, Brian honed his skills in hunting and vast knowledge of Africa's flora and fauna.

Ever since Brian was introduced into professional hunting, it was his ambition to enter the safari industry. After leaving school in 1989, Brian pursued his passion and started his apprenticeship in Zimbabwe hunting on numerous big game concessions all over Zimbabwe. Whilst still an apprentice hunter, Brian started his big cat hunting experience by hunting the cattle-killing leopards of the Zimbabwe low veld.

In 1995, Brian passed his professional hunters license in Zimbabwe and in 2001, Brian passed his Tanzanian professional hunters license. With his large amount of hunting experience and conducting over 150 big game safaris, Brian has personally harvested over 136 leopards, 56 trophy lions, over 300 buffalo and 50 elephant bulls. Brian has been on numerous outdoor big game hunting shows on African safaris within the U.S.

With great success cat hunting, he earned the nickname Catman among friends and clients. In 2010, Brian won the award at the Zimbabwe Professional Hunters Association for the biggest game animal harvested outside the country.

What do you wish a first-time dangerous game client knew before arriving?

I think the first and foremost is gun handling and gun safety. Together with reasonable knowledge of the animals he/she would be hunting, it makes the hunt more rewarding to the hunters themselves. Hunting is not about the tape measure, it's about being in Africa. Enjoy your hunt, soak in all that Africa has on offer. It's all about the enjoyment and experience of the hunt, giving the animals the dignity and respect they deserve.

How often do things go about as planned?

That famous saying "TIA, this is Africa" comes to mind in a instant.

There are definite plans made every day, before every hunt, but wild Africa is a fantastic place. You never know what lies around the next corner and careful plans can change in a blink of an eye or the jerk of a trigger throwing everything into total disarray.



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Who and how many people make up your best DG hunting team?

My team consists of two people. I have a fantastic 6-foot 4-inch giant of a tracker, Albert Ndlovu, with whom I've had the privilege to hunt alongside for the past 16 years. He is my right hand man and sometimes, is also my conscience. Along with him, I have his son, Proud, who is fast becoming just as good a tracker as his father. Together we make a formidable team.

What makes a good client into a great client?

I think great client is a guy who can roll with the punches, has a positive outlook and keep a smile in the process, especially when the hunt gets tough.

Do clients do a "starter" safari on plains game, but then "graduate" for a second trip? Or do you have clients who want to DO IT ALL?

I have had both first timers and repeat customers. But on the whole, with Tanzania being a bit on the high end, my clients tend to be guys that have hunted on a few safaris already. I think the first time hunter to come on a safari and jump in at the deep end. Wanting to hunt the Big Four on the first safari is a big ask, as these hunts are very energy-sapping, time consuming and mostly, very concentrated hunts, especially when hunting the big cats. These hunts take a lot of time, planning and can get monotonous i.e. driving checking same baits day after day. Checking baits is like opening a Christmas box sometimes you get a pair of socks; other times, it's the gift you've always wanted.

What was the best thing about your first dangerous game hunt, either as a pro or on your own?

I think all of the big game hunts are great hunts, as there is that element of danger in every hunt. From walking into lion blinds in the pitch dark to hunting elephant in the thick jess to seeing the huge magnificent herds of buffalo. My first big game hunt that springs to mind is my first buffalo hunt I did with my father. I was 17 years old and we had to shoot a buffalo bull that was injured. The whole experience became a memory I'll cherish till the day I die. I hope I can guide my son onto his first big game animal one day.



What was the worst?

I've been fortunate enough that I have not had anyone hurt on a safari. The worst day I experienced in the bush was when I was in camp in western Tanzania and got the news that my brother in law Wayne Clark was killed by a buffalo in Tanzania.

What is your favorite dangerous game species and why?

All dangerous hunts are unique in their own way as you hunt them all so differently. But if I had to choose one, it would be ranchland leopard. These majestic cats are sly and cunning. In my 24 years as a PH, I've been fortunate to hunt in many different areas and countries. I've had the opportunities of hunting some truly smart "cattle-killing" leopards. Getting one of these smart cats into the skinning shed is a rewarding hunt that takes a lot of hard work, time, patience and trial and error to try outsmart one of these cats.

What's the best advice you received as you were growing up and doing PH apprenticeship? Who are your mentors and heroes?

"Treat your hunting day with your client as if it is your first." A client spends a lot of time and money to be hunting with you. You should always be enthusiastic on every hunt whether it be a dangerous game hunt or a plains game hunt. When hunting becomes a job, then it's time to hang up your hunting boots. I've been fortunate to be in camp with many great PHs – too many to choose from. When I was a very young boy, my father taught me how to hunt and gave me the grounding of how I hunt today.

Do you have favorite dangerous game guns, optics and gear?

my big game rifle is a Heym 500 Nitro Express. I have had it for the past six years. It is my work horse – an extension of my right hand. It has saved my bacon on numerous buffalo and elephant charges. It is a well balanced double and really fits me like a glove. It is well regulated to the Hornady factory bullets. The recoil is great as it is more of a push than a crack and what's more it is not too heavy and easy to carry when tracking DG. It gives me the confidence I need when following wounded game in the tight, thick jess. My other back-up rifle is a .416 Remington – a great all rounder for more open areas.

If she was willing, would you take your mother on a dangerous game hunt?

My mother unfortunately passed a number of years back, but I can remember her taking me out on some back roads in her beat up sedan. I would stick my pellet gun out the window, trying to shoot a few doves for the pot. It was her way of keeping me entertained and keeping all the garden lizards and butterflies safe and out of harm's way.

If you knew you had just 10 days left on the planet, what would you do with that time?

Most definitely, I would spend with my wife and son, and more than likely, hunting in the Zambezi Valley. It is truly an amazing place. Cullen, my son, loves hunting and has accompanied me on a few hunts, including one rhino at the tender age of four. **GT**