

Jagdzeit

# Hunter's Path





## Namibia

# An Ostrich Opportunity

**Text and Photos: Frank Berbuir**

**I**t was a cold and dreary November in my native Germany, and the more inclement the weather the more I could feel Africa calling. So I made some phone calls, mostly just to inquire about possibilities, and found myself on a plane to Namibia by the end of the month. I had hunted there several times, and decided to hunt for the second time in southern Namibia, not far from Maltahoehe, and very close to the Kalahari Desert. Because this hunt was more of an escape from the gray weather of northern Europe than a serious safari, I was very relaxed and just interested in taking things as they came.

The 250-mile drive south from Windhoek was a pleasure, as I enjoyed the diverse and ever-changing landscapes, and the African sunshine that had been absent in my life for some time. As always, my welcome to Namibia was hearty, and accompanied by a chance to relax the first evening, and chat with some friends while

enjoying some Windhoek Lager around a fire. It is always great to settle back into Africa again in this manner.

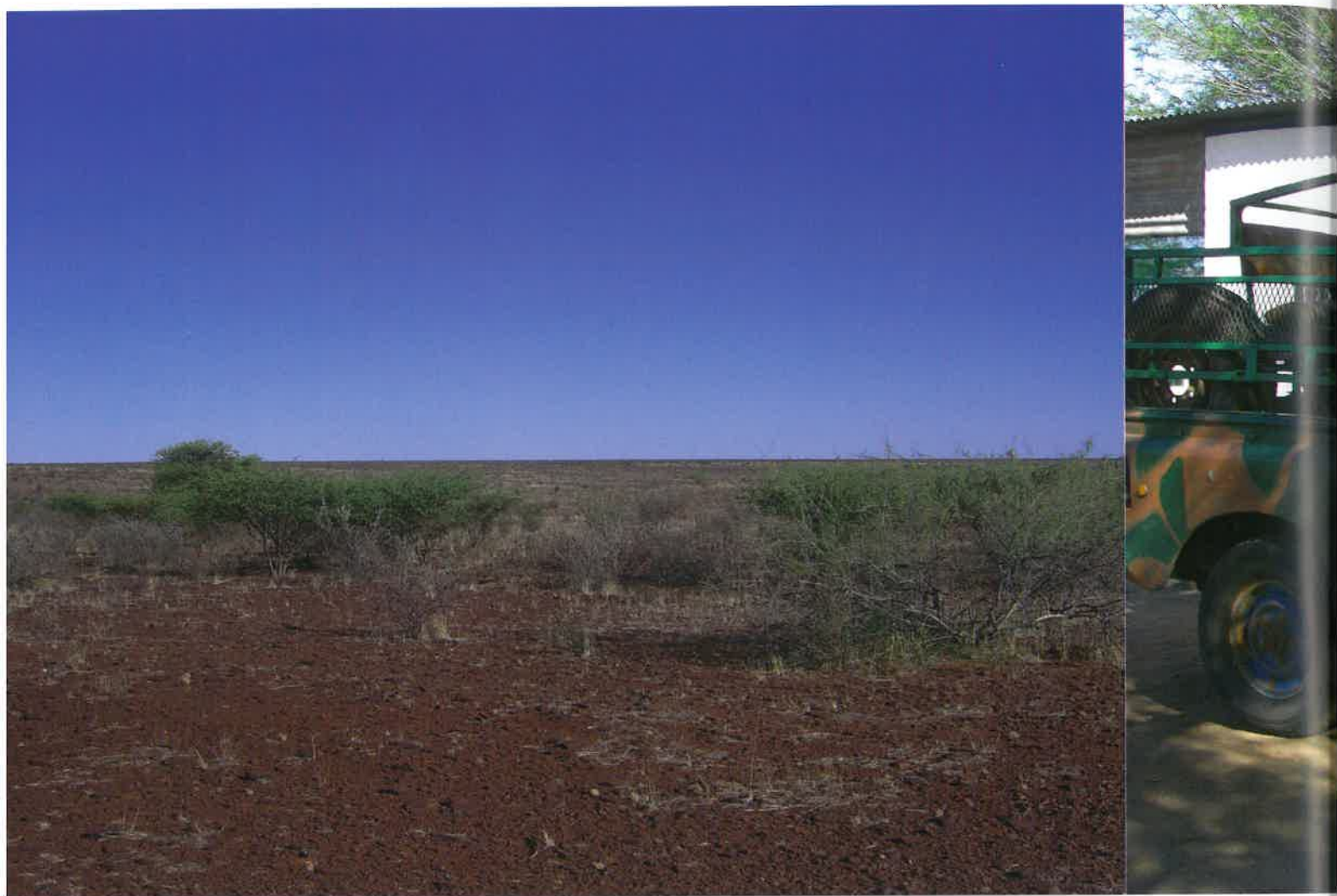
My main interest on this hunt was to chase springbok with a bow. For some reason the specimens in this area grow to trophy proportions, and are extremely challenging, especially when stalking them with archery equipment. We discussed plans for these medium-sized brown, white, and black antelope. Unfortunately, despite giving it our best effort for several days, none of our stalks came together, and we decided to change tactics and hunt from a stone hide near a waterhole.

Our first hunt began at three in the afternoon, and we regrettably spooked an old, and very good warthog as we approached. What a pity, but that is how it goes. Opportunity might knock when you least expect it. It was very warm, with the temperature hovering around 100°F, with only a faint breeze. The shade of the blind provided very little relief from the heat, and

unfortunately the game just wasn't moving. Birdwatching was the main event that afternoon. I enjoyed observing francolins, countless pigeons, and crimson-breasted gonoleks, among many other species, some that I recognized and some that I didn't. The number and variety of bird species in Namibia are simply amazing.

After sunset we returned to our 'bakkie' (Land Rover) and began the drive back to camp. It wasn't long before we encountered a bunch of ostriches along the lane. I asked Christian, my professional hunter, whether 'Mr. Big Bird' could be hunted. Before that moment, I had never even considered hunting ostriches. He answered, "Yes, you can hunt them, and the meat is excellent. Ostrich would also make a nice addition to our dinner menu. But do you think you can do it with bow and arrow? It is not easy to shoot an ostrich." Although his question certainly wasn't a challenge, I felt like I had to try to prove that it was indeed possible to take an ostrich with archery gear. I replied,





"I think it must be possible and I think we should try." That night I couldn't get the idea out of my mind.

I had actually seen my first ostrich in 2004. It is the world's largest bird. It also lays the largest eggs, and can run up to around forty-five miles an hour. The ostrich's diet consists mainly of plant matter. It lives in nomadic groups of five to fifty birds. When threatened, the ostrich will either hide itself by lying flat against the ground, or run away. If cornered, it can attack with a kick with its powerful legs. Mating patterns differ by geographical region, but territorial males compete for a harem of two to seven females. The long neck and legs keep their heads up to nine feet above the ground, and their eyes are of about two inches in diameter, and shaded from sunlight from above by their long eyelashes. Their eyesight is pre-eminent in helping them to detect predators at a great distance. However, the head and bill are relatively small for the bird's huge size,

and it is said that they aren't the smartest creatures in the bush. Ostriches usually weigh from 139–320 pounds, or as much as two adult humans. The feathers of adult males are mostly black, with white primaries and white tails. Females and young males are grayish-brown and white. The head and neck of both male and female are nearly bare. Their skin varies in color depending on the subspecies, with some having light or dark gray skin and others having pinkish or even reddish skin. Their strong legs are unfeathered and show bare skin. The bird has just two toes on each foot, most birds have four, with the nail on the larger, inner-toe resembling a hoof. The outer-toe has no nail. The reduced number of toes is an adaptation that appears to aid in running, and which is useful for escaping predators. The wings reach a span of about six feet and are used in mating displays and to shade chicks. The feathers lack the tiny hooks that lock together the smooth external feathers of flying birds, and are soft

and fluffy and serve as insulation. Ostriches can tolerate a wide range of temperatures. In much of their habitat, temperatures vary as much as 100°F between night and day. Their temperature-control mechanism relies on reaction by the bird, which uses its wings to cover the bare skin of the upper legs and flanks to conserve heat. The wings also function as stabilizers to give better maneuverability when running. Tests have shown that the wings are actively involved in rapid braking, turning, and zigzag maneuvers. The lifespan of an ostrich can be up to forty-five years.

Early the following morning we soon found ourselves in the old reliable bakkie heading back to the same blind. It was still cold and dark when we settled in for the morning, full of anticipation for what the day would bring. Our compensation for the early morning came when the first sunlight appeared over the hills and brightened up the landscape in new splendor. The birds commenced with their matutinal singing,



**Left:** Sparse cover and rough terrain in the south of Namibia.

**Middle:** The vintage “Landy” hunting vehicle.

**Right:** A social weaver nest in an old dead tree struck by lightning.

and jackals howling nearby. Moments such as these are part of the magnificent framework that defines the hunting experience. A little later we were further rewarded when two young gemsbok strolled in for a sip of water. They were completely unaware of our presence, and I was able to record some nice video before they departed.

Roughly a half-hour later a young springbok ram sneaked in from the grassland. He approached with great caution, and came to the water very slowly. Again, I was able to get some nice video. I was zoomed in on the ram's face when a shadow suddenly appeared in the frame of my camera. At that instant the springbok bounded off, and to my surprise he was being pushed from the water by an ostrich. There were five in the group. It was unbelievable, neither Christian nor I had heard or seen them coming.

Ever so carefully, I handed my camera to Christian to continue filming, and reached for my bow. I was in a state of

disbelief. Just the day before I had never considered taking an ostrich, and there he was, a large rooster, only twenty-eight yards away. A sudden jolt of adrenaline sent my blood pressure through the roof. Moving in slow motion I wrapped my hand around the birdseye-maple grip of my bow, and carefully got into shooting position.

The ostrich was lifting his head up and down between drinks of water, and the four other birds waited about ten yards behind. It was now or never. But where is the kill zone on an ostrich? A broadside shot is absolutely out of the question. This is because the bird's massive muscular legs cover the vital area of its relatively small body. A headshot is a possibility, but this is most often accomplished with a rifle, and is a low-percentage shot with a bow. And besides, the ostrich kept moving its head, making such a shot almost impossible. “Aim at the spot where the neck merges into the chest,” Christian whispered. “It is a small spot that you have to hit. If you hit



A happy Frank with his ostrich rooster.

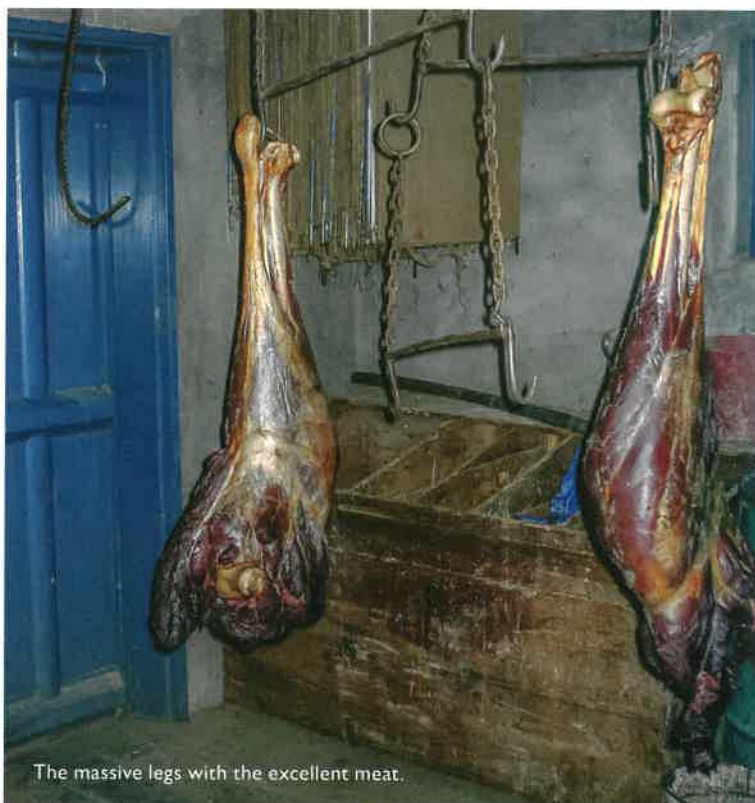
the chest you probably won't get enough penetration due to the sternum," he continued. Faced with taking the shot I realized what a challenge this was going to be. I basically had to hit a spot the size of a beer coaster that was moving slightly up and down at a distance of twenty-eight yards. Difficult but certainly possible.

I drew my bow and settled the appropriate pin directly on the throat between the neck and chest. For just an instant the rooster lifted his head and stood still while he swallowed a drink of water, and at that very second I loosed my arrow. It flew true, and hit the exact point of my aim with a loud crack. The arrow penetrated almost completely into the ostrich, with only the nock and bit of fletching sticking out. The big bird flapped its wings and tottered as it walked only fifteen yards before collapsing and expiring within seconds. Only after the rooster fell to the ground did the other ostriches run off.

I was in that magic state of slight shock and awe, like after most shots on game, and shaking some. I was still a bit shaky when Christian threw his floppy hat in the sand and congratulated me with some backslapping while exclaiming, "Great shot Frank, unbelievable, you did it."

We waited ten minutes before walking up to my ostrich. It was a hunting trophy that I never expected. When opportunity presents itself you have to take it. After some photos we loaded the ostrich into the bed of the Land Rover. Ostrich meat is valued for its fine flavor and we quickly got to the business of butchering. A couple of days later we enjoyed the first steaks from my big bird, which were incredibly tasty.

The remainder of the hunt was just as exciting, and I did manage to arrow a fine springbok ram, which is another story. The ostrich opportunity I will never forget, and a full-shoulder mount adorns one of the walls in my house as a tribute to an unexpected hunt. The African virus drew me back to the Dark Continent, and left me once again with many memories that will never be forgotten. ■



The massive legs with the excellent meat.



Ostrich steak dinner Nambian style.