

SAFARI TO BURKINA FASO

AN UNFORGETTABLE
ADVENTURE IN A
GAME-RICH NATION
OF THE FORMER
FRENCH WEST
AFRICA.



Our tracker pointed to the lion's spoor on the sandy soil. The tracks headed toward a verdant creek bottom that contrasted starkly with the dull brown vegetation surrounding us. Above the underbrush, in the distance, we could see tops of tall trees. They indicated the creek serpentine in a southeasterly direction.

Although it was midmorning, we were enveloped in a dusky haze. The breeze was out of the north, blowing across the Sahara Desert and carrying with it fine sand and grit. To my right, Tim Fallon was making certain his .375 Ruger was fully loaded and he had quick access to additional rounds in his cartridge belt, if needed. He nodded an affirmative, then moved closer to our professional hunter, Philippe Lavillette,

who said something to him in French. Neither Tim nor I understood a word of French, but we still knew what he meant. Obviously the track was fresh and we were about to follow the lion into the brushy creek bottom. If we happened to see the lion and Philippe thought him at least six years old, Tim would have to shoot quickly.

I checked my Ruger Guide Gun to make sure it was fully loaded, even though I knew it was. I had no intention of shooting unless things got a bit Western and Tim and Philippe needed assistance. The trail led into the little bottom, then paralleled a long water hole. We followed, paying attention to things around us, every sound, every movement, even every odor.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LARRY WEISHUHN

"Rrrraabhh! Rrrraabhh!" roars and grunts suddenly erupted a hundred and fifty yards ahead, just beyond where we could see. It sounded like the devils of Hades had escaped!

Philippe turned, smiled, and said, "Baboons!" Apparently the lion we were trailing had walked into a troop of baboons and the animals were none too happy about his presence. Quickly we moved forward, hoping to see the lion. Walking around a slight bend in the creek, we spotted two nearly grown cubs hastily disappearing into the dense underbrush, but there was no sign of the big male. The screams, grunts, and roars of the baboons continued for another three or four minutes.

Our trackers did their best to sort out the spoor, but the big male had walked on hard, dry mud where it was impossible to find tracks. After an hour of trying to pick up the lion's trail without success, we headed back to our vehicle.

We had been on fresh lion tracks every day for the last six days—females with cubs, small males, and two large, older males that had given us the slip. Obviously this area of Burkina Faso, not far from the border with Benin, had a substantial lion population.

Tim's and my hunt in Burkina Faso had its origins in a hunt we had done the previous year in Benin, with Safari Chelet. Tim had hunted lion there without success, but we had both taken extremely good western savanna buffalo. Tim had also taken a really nice harnessed bushbuck and a roan antelope. I failed to take a roan, but I'd had several opportunities. Each time I could have taken a shot, Blake Barnett,

the cameraman/producer for my television show, could not see the roan through the camera's lens. Then when he could see the roan, I couldn't. Such is making TV shows! Regardless of Tim's not taking a lion, and my not taking a roan, we had a fabulous hunt. Our Benin hunt whetted our appetites for a return to northwest Africa.

Tim Fallon and his family own the FTW Ranch, home of the Sportsman All Weather, All Terrain Marksmanship (SAAM) shooting school. He and I have hunted together in North America, Asia, and Africa. I live just an hour's drive from the FTW, and I spend as much time as possible on the ranch, shooting and learning by watching others as they go through SAAM's various courses.

Shortly after Tim and I started hunting together, he introduced me to Patty Curnutte, who, along with her husband, owns a booking service called The Global Sportsman. Since that meeting, Patty set up several hunts for Tim and me, including the current one.

Our Burkina Faso adventure began in a rather interesting manner. Upon arriving by plane in Ouagadougou (pronounced *Wog-ab-do-go*), our jumping-off point, I learned my visa was dated for a month later. I had to leave my passport with the Customs office to get another visa, and I did so reluctantly, with the promise it would be delivered to me at camp before I left. Scary! But they were true to their word, and my passport arrived by courier about halfway through our hunt.



Tim Fallon and Larry Weishuhn with Tim's Burkina Faso lion, an old, nearly maneless male.

At camp, we were introduced to Philippe, our PH, and his staff. We quickly learned he spoke no English, only French. We spoke no French. Thankfully, however, the language of hunting is universal. We understood very few words of each other's language; even so, we had no problem communicating when hunting.

Part of the fun of going to far-off lands is learning about the history and culture. Before leaving I did some research about Burkina Faso, which is situated south and west of the Sahara Desert. From the sixteenth through the nineteenth century, this broad savanna region was known as the Kingdom of Ouagadougou.

The primary ethnic group, although there are some sixty different ones in the country, is the Mossi. Tradition has it the Mossi originated from a marriage between Yennengo, a Mamprusi princess, and Riale, a Mande hunter. Their son, Quedraogo, is considered the father of the Mossi people.

During the early European colonization of Africa, the French settled the region and it became known as French West Africa. Later it was called Upper Volta. In 1984, the country established its independence and became known as Burkina Faso.

In doing my research, I learned Burkina Faso has excellent populations of such species as roan antelope, sing-sing waterbuck, western kob, western hartebeest, bohor reedbuck, oribi, western savanna buffalo, and Grimm (bush) duiker, as well as warhogs and other species found in northwest Africa.

Burkina Faso has an excellent lion population, with tightly regulated hunting, and a huge elephant population, which is not hunted. In spite of great hunting opportunities, very few Americans have hunted in Burkina Faso. This added greatly to our interest in hunting there.

Several times while driving the remote two-tracks and while on stalks, we were confronted by the area's abundant elephants. They had no fear of man and they didn't seem to understand "scram!" They seldom backed down, and more than a few times we had to make hasty retreats. Thankfully they did not complete their charges, but several times we were not too sure they wouldn't.

On the first full day of hunting we saw many western kob. They seemed to be everywhere. After a morning of following lion tracks that turned out to have been made by young lions, we decided to shift to antelope for the afternoon hunt. First we had a good lunch and a two-hour rest. By midday the temperatures were close to 100 degrees. No one complained about sitting in the shade during the heat of the day.

Leaving the relative coolness of the high-canopy, shady creekbottom, we found a small herd of western kob. Using his hands, Philippe indicated one of the males had long, massive horns. Philippe decided he and Tim should stalk and shoot the big ram. I watched from a distance as they got to within 150 yards of the kob. I heard the shot and watched the big male go down. A few minutes later I was at Tim's side congratulating him on his first Burkina Faso animal. His kob was absolutely



Larry Weishuhn with a fine roan antelope.

beautiful. It looked something like a cross between a lechwe and an impala.

We spent the rest of the afternoon looking for roan antelope and found several, but none Philippe thought worthy of pursuing. Late in the afternoon we tracked a herd of buffalo, only to get close enough and realize it was merely a group of cows.

Sleep came easily and quickly that night.

Before daylight the next morning, as I was crawling into the hunting vehicle, one of the trackers stepped in front of me without realizing it. I swung to the side to avoid him. Immediately I felt sharp pain in my lower left abdomen. I really didn't think much about it other than it hurt—perhaps I had pulled a muscle. As the morning continued I hurt a bit more.

About ten we started on a lion track. Three hundred yards into the walk, I decided to go back to the vehicle. I was hurting too much to walk any farther.

That afternoon we drove onto a broad savanna and spotted three roan antelope, all males. They ran about two hundred yards, stopped, and looked back at us. Philippe said something to the trackers. He grabbed my shooting sticks, then motioned me to follow him. With his hands he indicated one of the bulls had good horns.

We walked parallel to the roan until we were hidden behind a screen of brush, then turned in their direction. Taking advantage of the cover, we cut the distance to about 150 yards. There the tracker set up my shooting sticks. I rested the Ruger, then turned to Philippe. He held up three fingers, then with his right hand pointed

to his finger on the right. I knew what he meant. I settled the cross hairs of the Zeiss on that bull's shoulder and gently pulled the trigger. At the shot the bull bucked and ran to the left. As soon as I shot, I bolted in another fresh round and brought the cross hairs to bear in front of the bull's shoulder. I was just about to shoot again when the bull stumbled and fell. I kept my cross hairs on him—if he so much as wiggled, I was going to shoot again. He didn't move.

My roan was big; these animals are among the largest antelope in Africa next to eland. And he had gorgeous, long, curved horns! I could not have been more pleased.

Later that afternoon, after looking over numerous western hartebeest, Tim found one he wanted, an ancient old male with thick, backswept horn tips. One shot from his .375 Ruger rendered the hartebeest "ready for the salt."

On our way back toward camp, we spotted another herd of western savanna buffalo. We drove past, parked, and walked to where we had last seen them. They had moved, but we picked up their tracks and trailed them for about a half mile. They stopped to feed in tall grass. Taking advantage of the wind, we maneuvered closer to glass the herd—cows and calves and one young bull. Philippe indicated the bull was young and too small. By the time we walked back to the vehicle the hunt was over for the day, as legal shooting hours in Burkina Faso are from 6 AM to 6 PM.

Back at camp, heading to the shower, I realized I had a huge bruise on my left side from just below my navel to almost my knee. Apparently I had not only pulled some muscles, I had also ruptured some blood vessels earlier when crawling into the hunting vehicle. Just before supper I told Tim about my situation. We decided I should get on an aspirin regimen, as a blood thinner. We talked further and agreed that if my condition changed he or I would immediately call Global Rescue to get me to a doctor. Thankfully there was a satellite phone in camp. (My Global Rescue card is truly one I don't travel without.) Thankfully, other than discomfort when walking, I was fine the rest of the trip. Later, back home, my family doctor grounded me for several days. Fortunately, there have been no residual effects.



Tim Fallon with his beautiful sing-sing waterbuck.

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Coming into the Burkina Faso hunt, there were two primary animals I wanted: a roan antelope and a western savanna buffalo. If possible, I also hoped to take a harnessed bushbuck. Tim's primary animal was a lion, but he also hoped to take the various plains game Burkina Faso had to offer.

During the next days we tracked numerous lion and buffalo. We got close to several more buffalo herds. Twice there were only young bulls in the herd and three other times kob or warthogs spooked the herd before we could get a shot. We also

followed two big bulls that crossed deep water and we could not follow. While tracking buffalo we found fresh hippo and croc tracks. We did see crocs, but we never did see any hippo. Several times we were confronted by irate elephants and had to retreat rapidly, which made for some interesting and anxious moments!

We hunted lion in the morning and buffalo and plains game the rest of the day. Tim took a very nice bohor reedbuck, which we saw run into a clump of tall grass. When it broke cover he made a great running shot. Later that same

day we spotted a Grimm duiker. Tim was able to stalk to within close range and take the handsome male.

We were driving from area to area looking for buffalo and checking for lion tracks when we spotted a gorgeous harnessed bushbuck. He was about a hundred yards off of the two-track. We drove past, stopped, got out, then slowly headed back to where we had last seen him. He had moved but was still in the same opening. Taking advantage of the wind and cover, we stalked to within a hundred yards. I shot from there, and he went down. I've long been enamored with bushbuck and have hunted other subspecies in southern Africa. To me, the harnessed subspecies is the most beautiful of the tribe.

On the eighth morning of our hunt, we drove south to where a couple of days before we had found a big set of tracks. We soon found fresh lion tracks crossing the dirt two-track. Rather than immediately following the spoor from there, Tim and I indicated through hand signals that we wanted to continue driving the road to see if the lion had crossed a second time. We drove on. A half-mile later, we found where the lion had crossed the road going the opposite direction as the first tracks. Apparently he was zigzagging, hunting between the creekbottoms on either side of the dirt road.

The track looked fresh, so we decided to continue from there on foot, but rather than follow the tracks, we decided to walk the road. If we found he had crossed the road again, we would get on the spoor and follow. If we didn't find another fresh track, we would return to the last tracks and start from there.

We walked about two hundred yards, looking ahead and on both sides, as well as behind us, as we went. Philippe, the trackers, Tim, and I could hardly believe it when we saw the lion step into the road about a hundred yards ahead of us. He stopped in the road and turned broadside. Tim was immediately on the sticks and on target, waiting for Philippe to make the call—shoot or don't shoot. It seemed like an eternity before Philippe hissed, "Shooooot!" and, to me, it seemed like a second eternity before Tim pulled the trigger. At the shot, the lion did a flip and lay still. Tim kept his rifle pointed at the downed lion.



PH Philippe Lavillette and Larry Weishuhn with Larry's harnessed bushbuck.



Tim Fallon with his bohor reedbuck.

There was no movement, not even a tail twitch. Tim had his lion.

After shaking Tim's hand and dancing a couple of jigs, we walked closer to inspect the lion. He was an old one, huge of body, although not heavily maned, which is typical of northwestern African lions. He was missing a lower canine and his teeth were well-worn. No doubt he was at least seven if not eight or more years old. We were ecstatic.

With Tim's lion down, we started hunting another area to look for singing waterbuck and buffalo. We soon found a monstrous waterbuck. Tim was able to stalk close and shot him at less than fifty yards. The waterbuck was ruggedly handsome and long of horn.

We spent our last day looking for buffalo. That morning we stalked a herd that had some young bulls, but nothing as big as the one I had taken the previous year in Benin.

Toward the shank of the evening we found where a huge buffalo track crossed the road. We followed it for about a mile. There, the track joined a big herd. Two miles later we caught up

with the herd. The big bull was on the backside, barely visible. There was 250 yards of open space separating us, and no way to get closer or circle the herd because of the wind. We were about to start walking single file toward them in hopes of closing the distance when three kob spooked just to the left of the buffalo herd. Within a couple of heartbeats, only a cloud of dust remained where previously there had been nearly forty buffalo.

We followed them for half a mile, to a point where the bull's huge track separated from the herd. We trailed the single track for another mile until it disappeared into a river. Glassing across the water, we could see where the buffalo had walked out on the opposite shore. Unfortunately, we could not follow. Not only was the water too deep and too wide, alas—the river separated Burkina Faso from Benin.

In many ways, it was a fitting end to a tremendously exciting and successful African adventure. One of these days I hope to return to Burkina Faso and look for that buffalo again. 📍

Hunting in Burkina Faso

Our Burkina Faso hunt was arranged for us by Patty Curnutte of The Global Sportsman (www.theglobalsportsman.com) agency. Patty also accompanied us to learn more about the area and the professional hunters operating there.

Our flights were arranged for us by Traveling with Guns (www.travelingwithguns.com). Steve Turner and his crew have arranged many flights for me to foreign destinations. They specialize in getting hunters and their guns to hunts throughout the world. We flew Air France, and Travel with Guns made certain our guns accompanied us and the appropriate paperwork was done.

A visa is required to visit Burkina Faso. It can be arranged well before the trip. Unfortunately the wrong arrival and departure dates were shown on mine. I should have checked as soon as I got the visa, long before leaving, to be certain the dates were correct. This was my mistake!

Tim and I both used Ruger rifles in .375 Ruger. Tim's is a Model 77 African and mine is a Model 77 Guide Gun. Both rifles were topped with Zeiss HD5 2-10X scopes with Z600 reticles ideal for shots out to 300 or more yards. Both of us carried Zeiss Victory 10x RF binoculars. We shot Hornady's 300-grain DGX loads.

Temperatures in Burkina Faso can be on the hot side, reaching 100 degrees or more during the day. The mornings can be cool. Most of my clothing was from Walls Outdoors. Be prepared for long walks. My personal choice of boots for this type of hunting are Russell Moccasin's Longhunter.

Tim and I are both members of Global Rescue (www.globalrescue.com), which is good insurance in case of medical emergencies. I highly recommend anyone who travels to and hunts in remote areas, either in North America or abroad, be a member.

Our taxidermy was done by The Wildlife Gallery (www.thewildlifegallery.com). They do all my work.—L.W.



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