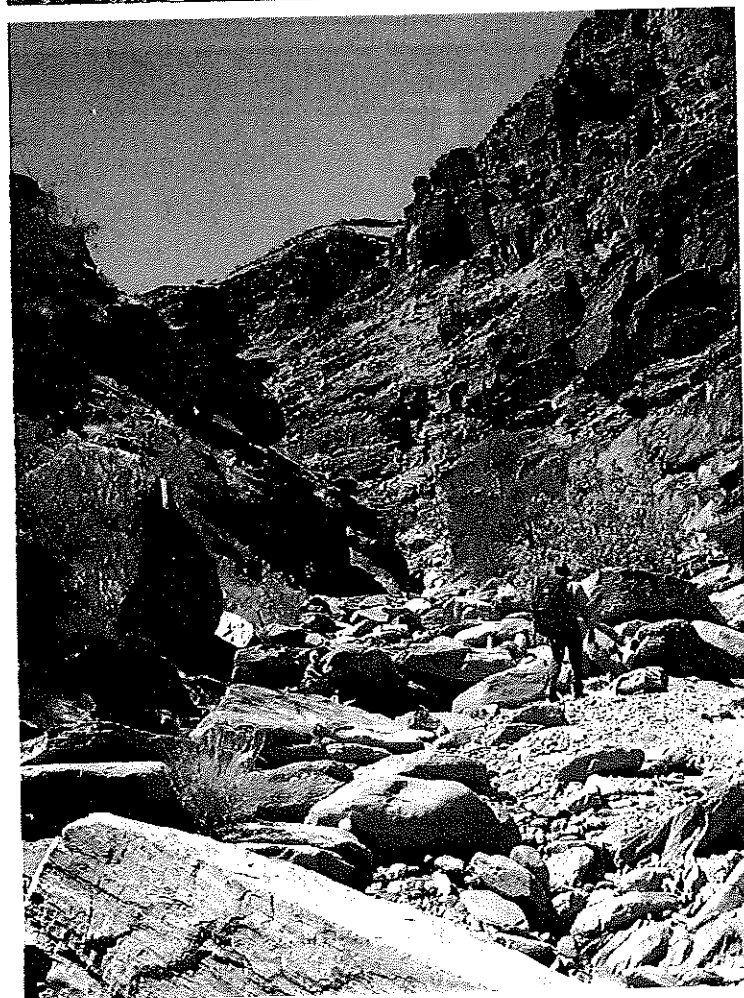
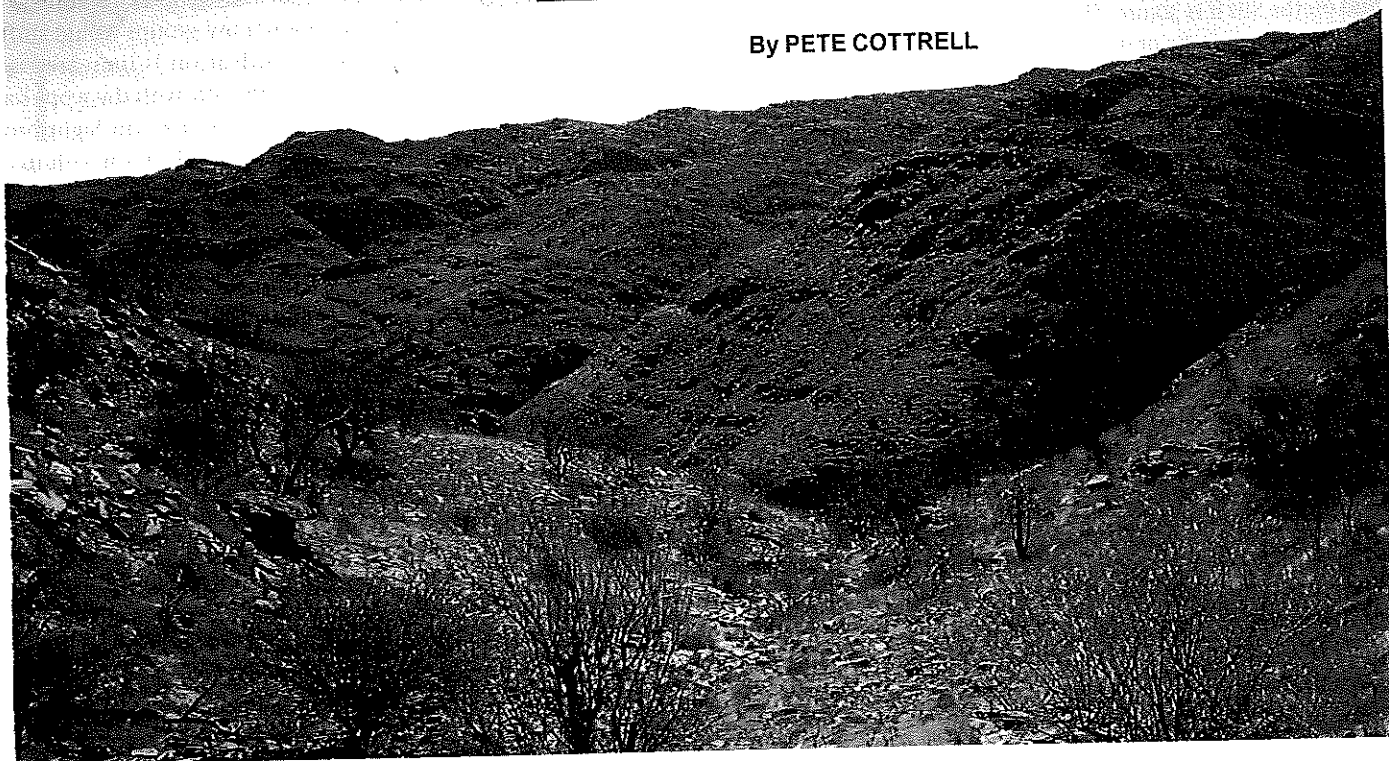


Backpacking the Namib

By PETE COTTRELL



Above: Part of the Hoornkrantz.
Left: Tackling one of the gorges.

The whole idea started when I read Gregor Woods's September 1996 article on his backpack hunt for Hartmann's mountain zebra in the Gamsberg Mountains of Namibia. This type of hunt immediately appealed to me for several reasons: it seemed to be the ultimate walk-and-stalk hunt; it was in a very remote and beautiful place; you get to sleep out and really experience the environment; it is physically demanding, and the quarry is extremely difficult to hunt, which, although tough at the time, results in immense satisfaction once achieved.

After trying to find the outfitter without success, I had basically given up, when, last year, I saw his advert for this same safari and jumped at the chance, booking a three day hunt.

The area we hunted was about 130km south west of Windhoek. The Gamsberg is an inaccessible range of mountains forming the escarpment down to the Namib Desert; in fact, from the highest hills we could see the dunes in the distance. Mt Barry is one farm, which, along with several others, form the Hoornkrantz Conservancy covering an area of about 125 000 acres. The term 'farm' is a euphemism, since, due to the nature of the terrain, it is impossible to build roads or infrastructure, hence the healthy population of mountain zebra which have continued to live there undisturbed since time immemorial.

Gregor had mentioned that one should train hard and be physically fit for this hunt. His own training included running up Cowie's Hill with a thirty-three pound backpack. I was fairly fit and had done a bit of running, so I laughed off Gregor's

advice as a bit of sensationalism – this was my first mistake. When I read that John Wambach, my PH, was a seasoned tri-athlete, the alarm bells should have started ringing.

On the first morning I quickly learned that this was not going to be a walk in the park. We were loading our packs for the three day hunt. Contents included: 15 litres of water each, contained in five-litre *papsakke* (wine bags). Food consisted of biltong, dried fruit and peanuts. Because water is obviously crucial in the desert, we could only take food that didn't require water for cooking. We packed our sleeping bags and spare clothes, and I carried rifle, ammunition, binoculars, camera and hunting knife. All this made for a very heavy pack and 500m into the hike I was already questioning, "What have I got myself into?" I would be repeating this mantra frequently during the next few days.

All of the first day we hunted/hiked up a steep gorge formed by a tributary running into the Gaub river. The gorge was starkly beautiful and at times we were hemmed in by 300 – 400m cliffs where the sun only reached if directly overhead. Occasionally we came across large fig trees in the dry river bed, which are able to tap the underground water, and in these we saw rosy-cheeked lovebirds. At other times we saw hills covered in *kokerbome* (quiver trees) and primordial-looking rocks that appeared to have been burnt by the sun. It was on these ridges that we kept an eye out for zebra. Although the going was tough, there was no shortage of beautiful sights and sounds to keep our minds off the fatigue. Quite frequently we would come across holes in the river bed, especially in sharp bends in the

Below left: Zebra bath.

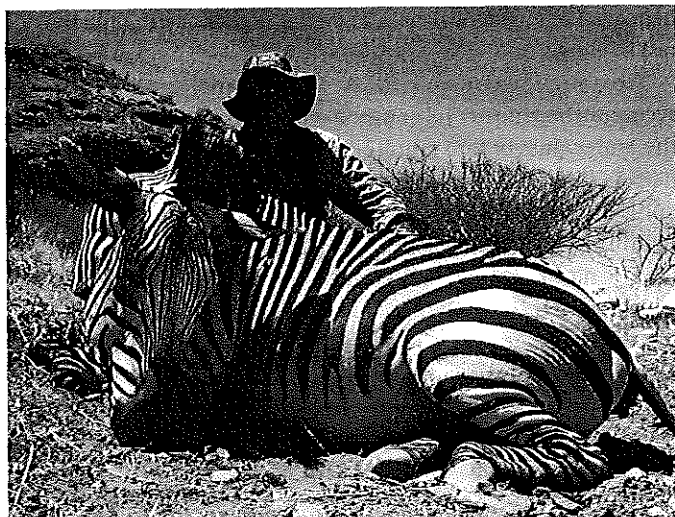
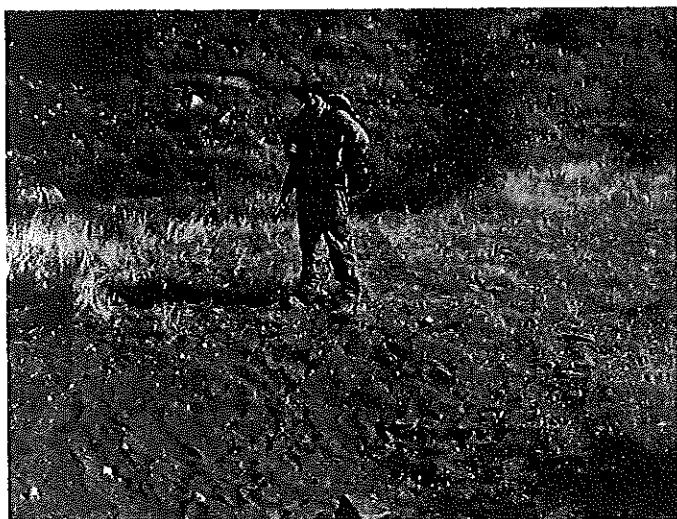
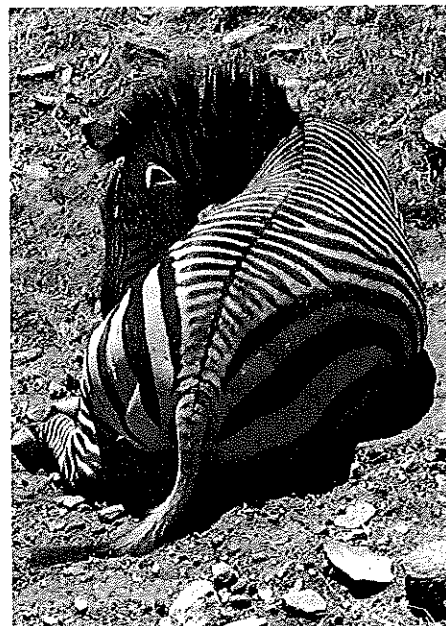
Below right: The author with his mountain zebra trophy.

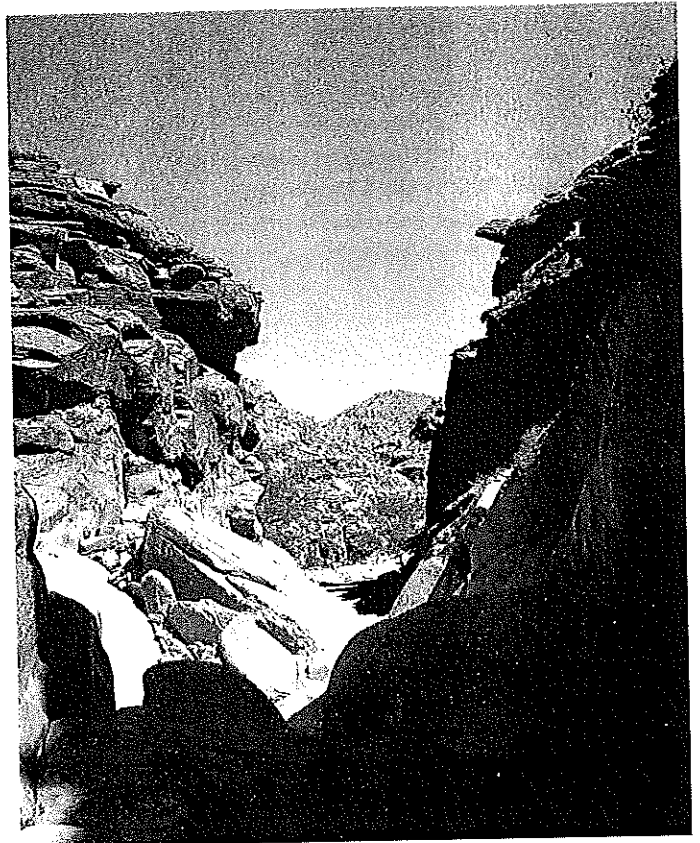


Above: Trees are few and far between. Below right: Notice the herringbone pattern on the rump of the Hartmann's mountain zebra.

river, which had been dug by zebra – water seeps into these holes allowing the zebra and other animals to drink and survive.

We walked all day and at about 4pm John announced that we were going to camp here, on a beautiful beach in the river bed, surrounded by towering red cliffs. By this time I was very tired, and happy just to drop the pack and put my feet up. There was, however, to be no rest for the wicked, and John said we should clamber up one of the slopes to have a look for zebra. "Left or right side?" he asked. The cliff on our right side looked only marginally less steep than the left, so that one it would have to be. Murphy's Law: as we struggled to the top like dassies, John spotted a herd of zebra





Above and left: Very broken country.

on the opposite side. We would have come up right on them had I chosen that side! There were about six in the herd; they had already seen us and were moving off.

I marvelled at how beautiful they were. The stripes seemed narrower and more distinct than those of the Burchell's zebra, with no grey 'shadow' stripes. The stripes also formed an intricate fishbone pattern on the rump and continued all the way down the legs. Then there was the distinctive dewlap and completely white belly. Overall they were smaller than the Burchell's zebra, but bigger than our native Capè mountain zebra.

Hunting these animals is hard at the best of times, and John likens it to hunting bighorn sheep in the Rockies of North America. They have extremely good eyesight and if they see you before you see them, the chances of success are low. Also, although there are quite a few zebra, you have to cover a lot of ground to find them, hence our having to walk all day, with the packs, with only the odd rest in between.

That night we shared hunting stories and I realised what an accomplished hunter John was, having hunted all over Africa and the States. Just before going to sleep under the veil of stars, we heard a herd of zebra picking their way down into the kloof near our camp. Minutes later we could clearly hear them digging and fighting in the river bed – another great experience.

The next morning John decided that we should hike out of the gorge in order to get to higher ground. Easier said than done. We struggled and slithered and panted up over the scree where we had seen the zebra the previous evening. After five minutes I was sweating despite the morning chill. John was relentless and whenever it seemed as if we had finally reached the top there was another rise ahead. Finally at the top, we immediately spotted another herd of eight zebra. Once again, even at 1.5km, they had already seen us and

were trotting up the far mountain. We were now on a high plateau and decided to go west, into the wind. The going here was a bit easier and we covered ground well. We began seeing more evidence of zebra, fresh spoor and dust baths. We even saw a herd of kudu cows resting in some scrub. In one of the dry river beds we saw some huge leopard pug marks, and less than 100m further on we came across a kudu cow carcass, the bite marks on its neck clearly visible.

Eventually we got to a spot where we had spectacular views over the whole canyon. We sat down and started glassing the hundreds of kloofs and gorges, looking especially in the shadows cast by cliffs, as this is where the zebra like to rest. John soon spotted another herd about 2km away. I was amazed at how well-camouflaged they were and it took me a while to even see them. Fortunately they had not seen us – we had a chance.

We had some rough country to go through to get to a point where we might get a shot across a valley. Having traversed a couple of kloofs we realised we were still not close enough, and this meant having to circumnavigate another mountain and climb yet another higher one to get a shot. The excitement picked up as, about an hour later, we neared the place John had aimed for. We dumped the packs and John crept to the edge of the ridge. Immediately he indicated I should crawl over quickly. What luck; the stallion had actually moved up the ridge and was now standing below us about 120m away. I quickly made the shot and he went down after running 50m. I was overjoyed that the shot was good, especially after all the hard work we had been through. We took a bit of time to enjoy the stallion and the surroundings.

John said, "Now the hard work really begins." He wasn't joking. In the excitement I had not begun to think about getting the zebra back to base. We now had to skin and quarter the carcass and carry it about 10kms over difficult terrain... I remember reply-



Left: Our camp spot for the night. Right: A kudu cow freshly killed by a leopard.
Below right: A leopard caught by John Wambach's trail camera.

ing, "Don't say that. I've barely made it this far". We skinned and butchered the carcass where it lay, which took a couple of hours. We then drank as much water as possible, to make space for the skin and meat. If my pack was heavy before, it was now 'crazy' heavy. Now I was really wondering why I was doing this.

What goes up, must come down. It was now seriously hard going and with the pack, it felt as if I was constantly giving someone a piggyback ride. We had some serious ridges to descend and climb. After a couple of hours I was really exhausted and dehydrated. We had been walking along some zebra paths strewn with loose rocks and sometimes with sheer 200m drops literally a step away. With the heavy packs constantly throwing us off balance, we had to be really careful. It was also demoralising when a turn took us to a dead-end and we'd have to back-track and find an alternative route.

In the end I was just concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. Even a slight incline now felt like a mountain. My pants were in tatters as I had long ago stopped walking around the *swarthaak* bushes because it was too much effort. Poor John must have thought I was delirious. At one stage I tried to suck a Super C for energy but it refused to dissolve as I had no saliva. Eventually we reached the Gaub river and I knew we were close. With the river sand now sapping my energy I had fallen a little behind and was considering the irony of the zebra I had just shot, now killing me, when John came round the corner with two litres of water and two ice-cold Cokes. Absolute heaven. I downed the water and Cokes in about a minute – it was the most delicious thing I have ever tasted.

That night, sitting around a fire in the Gaub, I realised how lucky and privileged I had been to experience this hunt in all its many aspects, and to have really earned the trophy. I couldn't help thinking that this must be like running a marathon: you constantly question why you are doing it, until you finish, and then it becomes the most rewarding experience. The cherry on top was when we saw that a big female leopard had been caught on John's trail camera while feeding on a bait not 300m from



where we had slept that night. It had probably walked right past us in the river bed but, given the way we smelt at that stage, I'm not surprised it gave us the berth.

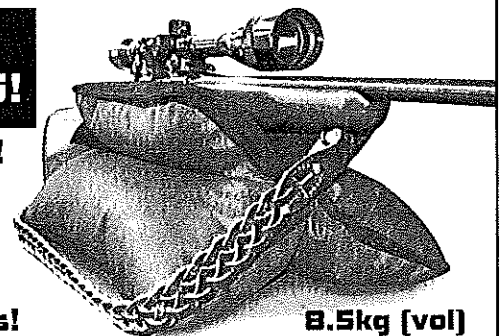
Now, several months later and fully recovered, I did another crazy thing – I booked another backpack hunt with John for next year. **m**



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