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Abstract: Cheetah hunting's stories from India

# *Reminiscences of Indian Wildlife*

by

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*Kumari of Gondal (daughter), designed and produced by*

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## **Chapter 5. Cheetah Hunting**

Hunting with the cheetah or hunting leopard was an old sport as in the time of Kublai Khan and it came into India with Moghuls and Persian emperors. Till Independence many Princely States had cheetahs for hunting the Indian antelope and gazelle. My father had at one time as many as thirty-two African cheetahs, nothing compared with Emperor Akbar who had over a thousand. When I took an interest in cheetahs there were none, until my elder brother thought of reviving the sport in the traditional manner. Just before Independence, we had nine at a time when blackbuck were abundant.

For training cheetahs, we had hereditary Muslim trainers who knew the art well. Cheetah hunting is a clean sport. Either the blackbuck is caught and killed or it escapes scot free. There is no noise like a rifle report and no wounding. All our cheetahs were imported from Africa as adult specimens but not old. They were trained to catch only the male antelope.

Generally there are two methods of cheetah hunting. There is the Mewadi way, in which a cheetah is unhooded at a distance to stalk its prey. This may take time and there must be some cover for the cheetah to make use of. If the antelope take alarm or some interference takes place the stalk fails. The other method was to release the cheetah when in suitable range of antelope, when a direct chase takes place. This method is the one commonly used.

Once a cheetah is released, he gallops and the blackbuck, confident of his speed, takes it in his stride until he finds the pursuer rapidly making up, then he straightens out and the cheetah also flattens out at which time they have probably gone some 200 yards, after which the cheetah has to put on that extra speed to contact the buck. In those few seconds, he either makes it or not.

A cheetah does not pounce on his prey but uses his front foot which has a strong sharp dew claw. This is struck out at the hind parts or legs with a side stroke which when it hits more often than not trips the antelope and causes it to fall. Sometimes if one swipe fails the other front paw is used. The strike is sometimes a powerful blow and has resulted in the fracture of the femur bone of a buck. When there is contact of dew claws or foot the cheetah brakes with his hind legs. When the antelope falls to the earth the cheetah swiftly and with agility catches hold of the throat and presses down the prey with both its forelegs while sitting down at right angles and away from flaying kicks of the hind legs of the antelope which can be devastating. The blackbuck is the heavier of the two animals and does not always fall so easily and one may see a cheetah riding him with both his paws transfixed to his flanks with the help of the dew-claws which are like hooks. Finally the cheetah has time to change his grip and is able to get at the neck as the blackbuck falls.

This dramatic scene is rather poignant to see. The whole hunt is over in a matter of minutes, so quickly and yet so spectacularly. The sheer speed of both animals is so

impressive. Many a visitor, however, is disappointed at the show ending so quickly, but what about a deadly shot with a rifle? It is over even more quickly and often without any action. In cheetah hunting one sees two of the fastest animals in the world competing with each other, one for its food and one for its life, in the most graceful and exciting manner. This is a performance to be appreciated only if it is to be seen.

If an average cheetah is well trained and is able to get within 100 yards of the buck he has a good chance of success. Yet there are cheetahs and cheetahs and it is one cheetah whose outstanding performance stands out above others. This cheetah, 'Huzur Pasand', was a male African cheetah in his prime. To look at, he seemed like an invalid, thin, long, light in colour, a small head and a short coat. His trainer Alam-Gir Khan knew his job well, derived from two hereditary cheetah-training families, his own from Alwar and his father-in-law's from Bhavnagar, he being in the service of my brother, Sir Krishnakumarsinhji of Bhavnagar, former Governor of Madras.

It was during World War II that Huzur Pasand showed his brilliance and it is on one occasion that I here mention his outstanding performance. He was also one of the cheetahs which had downed nilgai.

In the billiard table-like flat grassland of the Bhavnagar Bhal there roamed thousands of blackbuck in herds, a line which took a quarter of an hour to pass from one portion of the horizon to another, a stream of antelope, a thick moving line of fawn and black and white colour, a chain in movement magnifying itself in the mirage like a ghostly train, a sight now unimaginable. The blackbuck are no more in those hordes and the habitat drastically limited. In order to contact the blackbuck without delay an armoured car or jeep was sometimes used instead of the traditional bullock cart, especially in the Bhal flat land.

On the day of the outstanding event, early in the morning a pair of male and female cheetahs had been released from the bullock cart and had successfully brought down a blackbuck. With two cheetahs working together it is interesting that only one pursues the quarry, the other watching carefully but keeping alongside and slightly behind its partner. On seeing the chase with the chances of the quarry escaping, the following cheetah immediately takes up the chase, and if he is in range puts in his best effort to catch the buck, which may end in success. This remarkable understanding and co-operation of the cheetah makes the sport interesting, as sometimes the buck is so pressed that he must wheel round only to find the other cheetah, to his disadvantage, almost facing him. However, not always is it easy for two cheetahs to capture a buck, especially if the buck has outrun the leading cheetah generally in a straight run, for then, the second cheetah finds the distance to cover too much. Normally, only one cheetah is released at a blackbuck.

On that memorable warm Friday afternoon we found a small group of blackbuck taking alarm at the sight of our vehicles and it seemed convenient for us to give chase in a jeep. The herd, on seeing the oncoming vehicle, galloped at full speed, leaving us behind and compelling us to step on the gas to keep up. As we barely managed to keep up with the herd, the master blackbuck was the last in the string of fleeing antelope. Now, in order to release Huzur Pasand, we had to halt the jeep and this would mean loss of ground and the cheetah had to start from standstill.

Huzur Pasand had an awful habit, not always to his detriment, of standing stock still after being released if the buck stood his ground, but when the quarry ran or bolted he would start his chase. In this case, the blackbuck was already at full speed as we had been chasing him at 55 mph and now as we applied our brakes, the blackbuck was gaining ground by leaps and bounds. Before the jeep could come to a full stop, Huzur Pasand was unhooded and seeing the blackbuck going a full length, he leaped out an once, scratching an occupant with his hind legs. As he shot out, he did not wait and stand like a statue as was his habit but sped at a fast pace at the antelope, which were in full flight, his eyes on the trailing blackbuck.

Realizing the unusual handicap he was placed in, a distance of 200 yards or more, with a

racing start for the blackbuck, Huzur Pasand paced his stride and kept his wind and having made up half the distance from the blackbuck with extraordinary timing and conservation of wind, he began to gain on the blackbuck at full speed until he was barely 50 yards behind the master buck then also at full speed. Spellbound we witnessed the most amazing performance of speed we had ever seen, as Huzur Pasand released that super-charged speed which a cheetah does when he knows that it is his last chance to reach his quarry before he is completely winded. We have also witnessed a similar spurt by a blackbuck in order to escape, but in this instance the blackbuck had not that extra energy and Huzur Pasand struck out with his front leg, with unerring skill, then all we saw was a cloud of dust rise as the blackbuck was toppled to the ground. When we drove up, we saw Huzur Pasand sitting with his vice-like grip on the blackbuck's neck with the buck struggling and kicking but in vain. The distance of this run of about 600 yards or more was one of the grandest runs we had seen on table top-like flat ground.

We have seen many hunts by Huzur Pasand seldom failing. A hare is too easy to catch for a cheetah as we have so often seen.

Another no less exciting cheetah hunt was seen when a female cheetah tripped herself over in a complete somersault when pursuing a blackbuck at full speed, and then from standstill accelerating to make up and clamp her claws on the racing blackbuck. As the female cheetah had winded herself she could not hold on for long. The buck, dragging her behind him, yet not able to escape, was forced to a standstill. As the keepers ran to help, the cheetah released her hold and as the blackbuck lurched forward to a racing start like a race horse, she sprang forward as if a spring had been released, to trip the blackbuck over and reach the neck with such dexterity and swiftness that the eyes could not follow.

Cheetah hunting is an exciting sport in which, when in bullock cart, the manoeuvring to get in range of the quarry is the prelude, whereas the actual run is thrilling and in the end, very abrupt, often with the cheetah winded and collapsing on his side and the buck galloping away with clouds of dust behind him, jumping up on all four legs in delight and stopping to look back a few hundreds of yards to see where his pursuer had vanished. Those buck which have been hunted by the cheetah before and escaped, disappear from the scene as quickly as possible. The bucks that mostly escape are those which turn sharply in both directions when pursued, especially on hard, stony or cut-up terrain. Soft ground and ploughed fields are an advantage to the cheetah. A cheetah not in fit condition is of advantage to the antelope and a cheetah thus out of form may repeatedly fail in his attempt. Although individual capacity and behavior of the cheetah may differ, training has much to do with good performance. The male cheetah is slightly the more powerful but not necessarily the better.

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