

Caracal

Above: Family cat: The caracal is believed to be related to the the African golden cat and the serval

Top right: On the prowl: The caracal typically hunts for small animals such as rodents and hares

I booked my first safari with Huntershill in 2006 after meeting the UK agent Neil Jones at the CLA Game Fair at Blenheim Palace the previous year. I had always wanted to hunt in Africa; one day, I was feeling particularly impulsive, and decided booking a safari would be a good idea. The two species I particularly wanted were the kudu and the caracal, the spiral horn being an iconic African symbol and the caracal the poor man's leopard.

I arrived in Africa having no idea what to expect and was met in East London (on the Eastern Cape) by my PH Bruce Niland, who put me instantly at ease. After a three-hour drive inland – the last 30 minutes of which were on dirt roads – we arrived at camp on a very hot April afternoon.



With all of the formalities over, it was down to the range to sight in the outfitter's .270 Brno. After three shots I proved I could ventilate the bull, and we were off hunting.

Over the course of the week I hunted an abundance of plains game, and I got my kudu on day four. But where was this caracal? We were out lamping five nights out of seven, and saw everything except the green eyes I was so intent on finding. The week went all too quickly, and I was home without a caracal.

I had to get this elusive cat, so in April 2007 I was back again. Once again, there was lots of plains game and lamping, but again there was no cat. Then Bruce suggested using the hounds, as one would when hunting leopard. Now that was what I called a good idea.

We were up at five o'clock to a misty morning with very fine spitting rain. I was looking around, a little dejected, thinking, "This is Africa – it shouldn't be raining!" The bakkie turned up with Bruce driving, three trackers hanging off the back and eight dogs. They were a mixture of black/white, brown/black and a Jack Russell with only three working legs. The fourth leg was permanently held high after an accident with a rhino. I remember thinking, "This is going to be interesting."

We set off into the misty rain with the clouds hanging low over the Stromberg Mountains. There was no sound at all. I was still feeling a little worse for wear after the previous night's party. There was no time to recover, however: unexpectedly to us all, a bull eland trotted out in front of the vehicle. Quick evasive manoeuvres were performed; one dog was flung out of the truck. Unfortunately, that was about as exciting as it got that morning. We positioned ourselves on top of a rocky outcrop, waiting for the dogs and trackers to come through the ravine that cut its way through the valley below us. I was leaning against the shooting sticks with my .222, ready for the cat to turn up. Nearly two hours later, the dogs appeared and we saw nothing. Everybody blamed the weather and we returned to the lodge for breakfast.

The sun reappeared and the rest of the week flew by. All too soon I was home, again cat-less. This was becoming an obsession.

2008 loomed large and I was back again, full of anticipation. The dogs were with us for two days this time, and there was an air of confidence in the camp.

We decided to push through a deep gorge with a burbling stream, which had cut a smooth path over the rocks over the centuries. It