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Something about an African trip

BY JIM HUCKABAY Contributing Columnist

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I spent last weekend in Portland, hanging out with my South African friends, Richard and Ruth Lemmer. They were hustling their Safari Afrika wares at the Pacific Northwest Sportsmen's Show in the Portland Expo Center.

You may recall that I dropped in on their home turf, near Mokopane in Limpopo Province, last July. At one time or another, we chased blue wildebeest, grey duiker, steenbok, warthogs and bushpigs, but mostly we looked at game farming a la South Africa. We laughed and ate and moved wild critters from one farm to another and looked for a big warthog. At one sudden moment, I was reminded how uncertain day to day life can be.

My first question, once I found their booth among the hundreds upon hundreds of outdoor dreams at the show, was "How is Esther?"

Esther has worked with Richard and Ruth for 25 years. She manages the house, keeps clients' rooms and clothing ready and helps with cooking. Without her behind the scenes, Safari Afrika would not enjoy the success it has.

Richard has been reestablishing nyala and impala on his farm, and sold the last of his cattle to Esther. She hired a guy to bring his two-wheel drive Toyota pickup and trailer on a Saturday to move them to a corral — boma — on her place at a village a few miles away.

Richard and I, with tracker Jimmy, spent that Saturday morning finding and tracking a very nice grey duiker ram. Once the ram was back in the skinning room, Richard suggested we take a run to Mokopane (about 20 minutes away) to pick up some groceries and exchange currencies.

Mokopane is a couple or three hours south and west of Kruger National Park. Probably about the size of Ellensburg, it is filled with blaring music and Indians and Africans of every shade. Here or there, street vendors might give way to a modern grocery or old office building. Almost everywhere you walk, you are surrounded by loud voices, music and laughter.

At any rate, during our drive Richard was educating me about proper terminology for various species of antelope. Nyala — about the size of a mule deer — were his baseline. “Nyala are bulls, ewes and lambs. Above (bigger than) nyala they are bulls, cows and calves. Below nyala, they are rams, ewes and lambs,” he said. In keeping with his responses to nearly all of my questions about wildlife and the land, he added, “And there will be a quiz later.” We were almost to town when his phone rang.

As we quickly turned around, he was visibly upset, talking about a conversation with the guy who was moving Esther’s cows. “I told him,” he said, “not to put all of those cows in his little trailer for one trip, but he’s always in a hurry.” It only took us a few minutes to get to the mess. The driver and a buddy had been up front in the pickup; Esther was in the bed. Coming downhill to a “T” intersection, the driver lost control of his light truck and its heavily overloaded trailer. As it left the road, his passenger bailed out the side door. When the whole thing hit a cross-berm head on, the trailer pushed up into the back of the truck. The driver was shaken, two of the five cows were slightly injured, and Esther — lucky to be alive in my view — had a shattered ankle.

Once Esther was in the ambulance, Richard located a trailer, we reloaded the cows, traded rigs with Ruth (so she and Jimmy could take them back to the farm) and we went on to Mokopane.

In and around regular calls to the hospital, life settled down again. We chased critters, watched baboons, ate great meals and laughed around the evening fire. I marveled at new things.

While checking out some leopard habitat, Richard broke off a branch of a plant that looked like dry sagebrush. He put it in water. A bit over a day later, we watched the leaves on Aaron Staf, the "resurrection plant," turn bright green.

One evening, just at dark, Jimmy pointed out the galagos, or "bush babies," leaping from the palm trees in the yard. The little primates (about the size of a small squirrel) can leap up to 80 times their length, and can be seen against an evening sky, the way we might watch bats flying. They are "nagapies" in Afrikaans — little night monkeys. They appear and are gone in an instant, and I took several photos of empty night sky.

At any rate, my Portland weekend brought good news. Esther is back in the household and doing well. All-around aide and tracker Jimmy — I call him Eagle Eye ("Mattho antshby" in his native tongue) — is on his way to becoming a Professional Hunter.

Richard and Ruth have offered ten days of Safari Afrika time to the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club for its Chukar Run auction at the end of March. The safari could be for photos or hunting or both. More information is coming, of course, but if you are the winning bidder will you please take me with?

Jim Huckabay is retired from the Department of Geography at Central and is the author of "WILD WINDS and Other Tales of Growing Up in the Outdoor West," available online and at local bookstores. He has been writing this weekly column since the first Friday of 1999. Contact Jim and join in the discussion of this and other columns at www.insidetheoutdoors.com.

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