



Chapter 7

Tally-ho!

IT MUST BE SAID THAT LIFE as a game ranger in the Drakensberg in the early 1960s was quite enviable. Management was simple and uncomplicated with few stringent ethical considerations. Certainly the emphasis on purist ecological management had not yet raised its well-meant but confused head. Theory does not always fit seamlessly into practical management and in those days we lived with a few straightforward problems: fires, poachers and the protection of the large mammals that were important to us. This included pursuing the age-old gamekeeper practice of destroying predators that were popularly believed to constitute a threat. At Giant's Castle, conservation practice helped by Bill's fondness for birds, had advanced to the point where we did not feel anything but admiration for the large raptors that lived in the protected area and there was never a suggestion that we should shoot them.

The same did not apply to the Black-backed Jackal (*Canis mesomelas*). The surrounding farms had, over a century or more, seen the importation of sheep, which had formed the basis of a stable and regular source of

income for the early settlers. Jackal predation on sheep and lambs had started early, and a strong antipathy towards this canine inhabitant of the region had been painfully established. By extension, and aware of the positive relationship between neighbours and the parks, the same attitude was prevalent amongst the early game rangers. The reputation of the jackal was not enhanced in that they had been seen eating the young of antelopes of the Berg, and numerous tales were told of the jackal's ability to kill even larger mammals.



Public Enemy No. 1

The jackal, despite being an indigenous species, and theoretically with every right to be protected in the Park, was perceived to be Public Enemy No 1. It must be said, in defence of the Natal Parks Board and its policies, that this bias was not restricted to the Natal Drakensberg. In the then Cape Province, extensive management programmes and techniques had been developed to control and kill jackal. The Cape Department of Nature Conservation, under the directorship of the highly regarded conservationist, Dr Douglas Hey, had developed a field station devoted to predator control, targeting not only jackal, but also Caracal Lynx (*Felis caracal*) and even Hyrax (*Procavia capensis*) or dassies.¹ Although at that time neither caracal nor dassies were problem animals in Natal, the jackal was treated as a serious threat and both the State through a bounty system, and nature conservation, through the passing of legislation to legalise

hunting packs, promoted the ruthless pursuit and killing of jackals.

Soon after the Second World War, the Natal Parks Board established its own pack of hunting foxhounds imported from England. The headquarters of the Drakensberg pack was established in the Kamberg Nature Reserve, where veterinary surgeon, Dr Bob Wright, was Officer-in-Charge, responsible for the health and wellbeing of this expensive management tool. After some rudimentary training from English hunt masters, the Board set to with a will to implement a jackal control programme. The rangers of the day, such as Peter Root (himself a former farmer) at Loteni Nature Reserve and Bill Barnes were enthusiastic supporters of the pack and it was not long before each reserve had a small facility for housing the hounds during their regular visits. I need hardly add that the local farmers were more than simply enthusiastic, because the more vocal amongst them never hesitated to blame the Board for any fatalities among their sheep. A common cry at farmers' meetings was that the Board was breeding the jackal in the parks and reserves, from whence they emerged to pillage and destroy local livestock.

As in the case of most polarised standpoints, there was an element of truth in their criticisms. There was no doubt that some jackals left the park for pastures new, and understandably so, because those pastures were often well stocked with sheep. It is again due to the sound public relations practised by the Board that, although farmers could get very heated over the jackal problem, this seldom led to any personal animosities. The establishment of the jackal control pack and regular hunts along the foothills of the Berg went a long way to persuade the farming community that the Board was doing its bit to help. The Board hounds were well trained so no antelopes were chased and it was not uncommon to ride past a herd of eland with the hounds paying them scant attention. Smaller antelopes normally darted away, and with good reason, for a common problem amongst packs of hounds run privately by the farming communities, and generally not under the direct control of the farmer, was that small antelope and other non-target species were often killed.

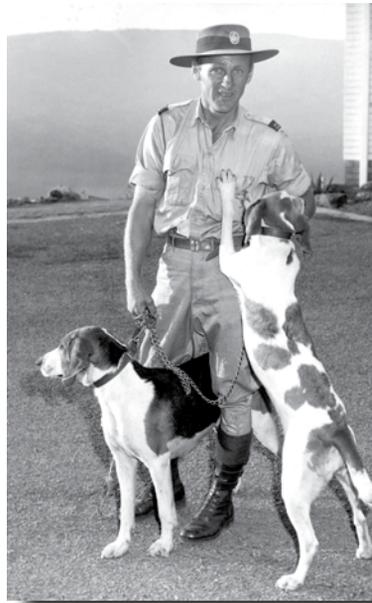
When I eventually gained sufficient skill to remain in the saddle when my horse accelerated beyond a gentle amble, Bill decided it would prove useful for me to join the hunt when the jackal pack came to Giant's Castle. This turned out to be a very exciting, indeed thrilling, experience which I look back on with considerable pleasure.

The hunt master at that time, with whom I enjoyed many an outing, was a short and stocky Dane, Andy Anderson. A builder by profession, Andy had fallen on difficult times and I can only speculate on how he managed to land the job. It certainly was not because he had any experience with pack hunting (he had none), and neither was it because of his fluency in English. Andy spoke a delightful variation of English in which he managed to miss some of the finer distinctions of the language. For example, if he was asked to do something with which he was not in accord, he would state quite firmly, 'No! That is not my cup of soup!'

Andy had only been in the job a short while when he first brought the pack to Giant's Castle and it did not take me long to realise that his riding skills were not that far ahead of my own. Possessing a great sense of humour, Andy was quick to acknowledge his shortcomings, and this resulted in two near-incompetent fools developing a truly joyful relationship.



Dr. Bob Wright



Andy Anderson

In these days of political correctness it is perhaps difficult to convince the morally proper of the sheer elation that a hunt, successful or otherwise, could generate. In my opinion jackal hunting added a dimension to my

mountain experience that is worth its weight in gold and I intend to try to do it justice.

The pack itself was made up of a motley collection of dogs although the majority were pedigree English foxhounds. They had the nose and their job was to pick up and follow the scent trail left by the jackal. Then there were long-legged killers, generally from greyhound stock, which seemed to have no interest in scent at all, but were lethal once the jackal was sighted. Finally, scampering around between the horses' hooves, were the small dogs, generally terrier types of the Heinz 57 variety, whose function was to pursue any jackal that had taken shelter in a sinkhole or *ixamuga*, created by a stream flowing underground. These sinkholes were common in almost every valley. The pack worked as a team and as a team they were united in two things: to kill any jackal they came across and an almost mad desperation for human affection. Under most circumstances this latter trait was manageable because after five or ten minutes of being licked and nuzzled by a variety of enthusiastic animals, you could put them into the pens and maybe pat them through the fence. When, however, you were out on an extended hunt and were billeted in a sandstone cave, no pen was adequate to hold the hounds. They would often join you in the sleeping section of the cave and, after extracting a more than usual amount of attention would settle down, thinking nothing of sharing the outer layers of your sleeping bag and draping themselves all over you. Despite this imposition they were truly endearing animals and were as excited as I was when we eventually readied ourselves for a hunt.

Jackals move around a great deal during the night and because of the heavy evening dew that dampens the grasslands, their scent is caught and most easily followed in the very early hours of the morning. In summer this meant that we were saddled up by 03h00, the hounds squirming around the horses in an orgy of whimpering anticipation. By 03h30, with the first flush of dawn wiping away the stars, we were already riding for the grasslands around the Cave Sandstone. There is nothing more exquisitely beautiful than the Drakensberg massif at that hour in the morning. The main escarpment is, at first, a brooding black presence from which the stars seem to spring. Then it turns from ink to dove grey, gathering character and contour, before slowly turning a blushing pink. The pink rapidly deepens into a warm red, blanketing the highest cliffs that seem to grow in stature as the first rays of the sun tip their peaks with yellow.

It is very quiet, the silence broken only by the swishing of the horses'

hooves through the grass. The dogs know their business – the foxhounds fan out several hundred metres ahead and around us, coursing for scent, the small dogs trot patiently alongside us. When a hound picks up a trail a howl rends the air. Soon the hound is joined by its companions and the hills echo to this baleful choir as the pack, baying in harmony, takes off in wild pursuit. The job of the horsemen is to keep the speeding hounds in sight and to ensure that they are not side-tracked, and this requires some hair-raising gallops over what is sometimes quite hostile terrain. It is also tremendously exciting as the chase collectively turns a gentle ride into a stimulating multi-media experience involving some quite genuine fear, accompanied by the chorus generated by thirty hounds.

It seems that every pair of eyes is now searching the grasslands for a sign of the fleeing jackal and, alas, there are times when suddenly the baying peters out and the hounds run hither and thither having lost the scent. This tends to happen more often in the later morning when the sun has begun to caress the grass and dry it out, taking the moisture and the jackal scent with it. During the early hours no animals are more eager than the killer dogs. They have amazing visual acuity and are almost always the first to see the jackal, and once it is seen, the killers take off like rockets in deadly pursuit, cutting through the hounds which now look almost slow. Our job becomes even harder as we have to try to keep up with the killers and that requires even greater speed from our horses. At the same time we try to sight the jackal ourselves. Once we see it, it is possible to choose with more care the direction to take to intercept it and then we can relax just a little knowing that if we can see it, the killers are almost certain to succeed. Despite the fact that we are now able to ride with more circumspection, it doesn't mean that we can slow down too much because the killers, once having caught the animal, might quickly tear it to pieces, thus rendering the pelt useless. So we ride hard to where the killers have caught up to the jackal, jump off and drive the dogs away. We seldom have to shoot the jackal – the killers are too efficient for that.

If the jackal has taken shelter in a sinkhole, the smaller dogs are sent into as many entrances as we can find. What happens under the ground can be surmised by the barking and yelping that generally does not last longer than about ten minutes, after which one or more of the dogs emerges dragging the carcass of the unfortunate prey. The jackal is thrown over the saddle of one of the team and the hunt resumes, moving to another part of the reserve until the sun rises too high, the grass dries off and it

becomes fruitless to carry on. Andy and I, in the early hunts, were quite pleased about that, because we were in rather extreme pain and very stiff as, especially for me, such vigorous and continuous riding was new.



The Board's English foxhound pack

As my participation in hunts grew so did my riding skills, as indeed did Andy's. We both came off our horses from time to time but the occasions became so infrequent that a dangerous complacency overtook us both. One morning after a successful hunt we returned to the road near the hutted camp quite late and on gaining the road decided to show off before some members of the public walking nearby. With a cheer, Andy cried that he would beat me back to headquarters and the two of us spurred our horses on and galloped as fast as possible along the road leaving the pack to follow. The horses entered into the spirit of the chase and strained to beat one another on the final straight towards the kennels. Alas, in our enthusiasm, we had forgotten that horses have good memories and, as we neared the gate and cattle grid, both slewed to a halt. Andy, if I recall correctly, was slightly ahead of me and was the first to catapult over his horse's head describing an almost perfect parabola before crashing on his back on the far side of the grid. Without allowing me any time to appreciate Andy's flying skills, my horse hurled me in a parallel parabola

only seconds later. Those precious moments allowed me time to adjust my flight so that I did not crash quite as flat on my back as Andy and I quickly rolled and stood up, still holding the reins, and tried to calm my alarmed steed.

Andy remained groaning on the ground and I started to laugh. He opened his eyes and, on seeing me standing there laughing, remarked rather testily that it wasn't funny and his back was sore. When I told him that exactly the same thing had happened to me, he got up, started to snigger and then stopped abruptly as he noticed, nearby, the sole witness of our folly, Bill's Zulu gardener who, clutching a rake was desperately trying to stifle a laugh and not succeeding very well. In those days shrieking with laughter at a fallen white ranger was not normal; laughing at two of them was distinctly abnormal. Straight-faced, we asked him why he was laughing, and his expression was a picture as he was caught between expressing his justifiable humour and trying to suppress it for career reasons. When we gave voice to our own laughter, he fulsomely shrieked his agreement and for some moments the three of us were almost helpless. The pain set in later.

The age of jackal hunting came to an end not long after I had left Giant's Castle. There were several reasons for this, and there was little doubt that costs played a part, as the staff and hounds were pretty high maintenance. Also when the 'wilderness' concept began to catch the imagination of the Natal Parks Board and the public at large, and research began to indicate that jackal in truth survived more on the consumption of small mammals like rodents than on antelope, the Board decided that hunting was improper in protected areas. David Rowe-Rowe, one of the Board's scientists, who in due course became an eminent mammalogist, undertook some excellent research into the behaviour and diets of our local jackals and his results proved highly influential in the eventual decision to stop hunting.

This did not do the Board's reputation any good though amongst local farmers. The sheep industry in the Drakensberg foothills has declined dramatically since those days and many farmers attribute the decline to the Board's decision. There is probably a small element of truth in this but one should never under-estimate the skill and cunning of the jackal which, once established in an area, is likely to survive whatever the hunting pressure. Our local farmers are still killing jackals but nowadays this entails night vigils, with infrared lamps and canned calls broadcast

over powerful speakers, which attract the jackal to within the range of rifles fitted with powerful telescopic night sights.

Regular visits to the Giant's Castle over the years have convinced me that there are fewer small antelope such as oribi, grey rhebok and mountain reedbuck than there were when I was a ranger. There may be many reasons for this, but of one thing I am sure: Bill Barnes would have attributed these apparent declines to the presence of jackals. One does, today, quite frequently see jackals openly wandering about the park during daylight hours, which almost never happened in the 1960s. Perhaps there is a problem with the wilderness 'do-not-interfere-with-nature' philosophy. Managing a protected area requires a broader vision than the wilderness concept. One has to make decisions as to what one wants to survive and what activities, predation or otherwise, require intervention. If one species, such as the jackal, exerts greater pressure than is acceptable on a more valuable species, such as the oribi, which requires greater protection because of declining numbers across its range, reducing jackal numbers may well be a necessary management imperative.

As I ponder this, I acknowledge that, today, having a jackal hunting pack do its job would be unthinkable. And I know that the Giant's Castle foothills will never again echo to the joyous and excited baying of English foxhounds pursuing a fresh scent – but I'm glad that I once heard that awesome sound.

¹ Hey, Douglas. *A Nature Conservationist Looks Back* (1995)



The original Bill's Barn



Later re-built