ANTELOPE *from the ashes*

- PART ONE -

The jet-black giant sable bull is a breathtaking animal. Imperious and awe-inspiring, it is endemic to Angola, where it is revered as a national icon, its distinctive scimitar-shaped horns adorning everything from postage stamps to soccer jerseys. There is a disconnect, though, between the antelope's symbolic importance and its conservation status. Ironically, the now-famous photograph that proved its miraculous survival through nearly three decades of civil war also held clues to its greatest threat yet – there were no bulls in the picture and at least one of the females displayed evidence of hybridisation with roan antelope. In the first of a two-part series, **John Frederick Walker**, who wrote about the rediscovery of the giant sable in 2005, takes us inside an audacious expedition to breed the subspecies back from the brink.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN FREDERICK WALKER

The expedition's helicopter lifts off from the warden's camp at Cangandala National Park in central Angola, pitches nose down, and roars south toward the Luando Strict Nature Reserve. This bubble-nosed, bumblebee-yellow Hughes 500 has only one door, making the four of us on board dependent on our seatbelts to keep from falling out, but the upside is that we get unobstructed views of the flat, desolate landscape slipping away beneath us. Vast blackened swathes left by recent annual burnings make the miombo forest below, dry and parched before the arrival of next month's rains, look ghostly. Scanning the bush for any movement, I am rewarded only by the small shadow of our chopper rippling over scabrous, long-abandoned cassava fields.

I'm part of a team searching for the legendary giant sable antelope, an Angolan subspecies of the common sable, whose thick-necked, glossy black males carry huge, backward-sweeping horns more than a metre and a half long. 'Critically endangered' sums up the status of an animal that's been flirting with extinction since its discovery by the outside world in the early 20th century. Pursued by trophy hunters, trapped in a war zone and now threatened by hybridisation, this arresting antelope is a national symbol whose importance to Angolans few foreigners can grasp. Before this expedition, the *palanca negra gigante*, as it's called here, was thought to be dying out. For all anyone knew, every giant sable bull in the park had been shot by poachers, leaving only a handful of barren females.

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I'm trying to keep my feelings in check. Since 1994, I've been pursuing the tangled story of this animal and I've never caught even a fleeting glimpse of one. Only a handful of people still living have. But like everyone else here, I'm ignoring the odds against finding any.

We've all bought into the vision of one man, Pedro Vaz Pinto, the driven, passionate Angolan biologist who has organised this expedition. He's worked for six years to pull off a conservation effort that many say is too late, completely pointless or simply impossible: snatch the giant sable from oblivion by rounding up any remaining survivors for a captive breeding programme. We'll need extraordinary luck, but the month-long expedition is just days old. We tell ourselves that anything could happen.

'Luando,' the pilot's voice crackles in our headsets. We pass over a coiling, tree-lined river glinting in the morning sun. The waterway forms the northern boundary of the nearby Luando Reserve. Apart from Cangandala Park, this much bigger and largely inaccessible watershed plateau is the only habitat of the giant sable, although its presence here hasn't been verified in decades.

Our rescue mission depends on the capture team's ability to find at least a few of these maddeningly elusive herbivores and dart them from the air – no easy trick. But Barney O'Hara, our red-bearded Botswana-based pilot, has worked on previous high-risk wildlife operations with the man sitting behind him, Pete Morkel. A tall, lean South African veterinarian and game capture expert, Morkel thinks nothing of heading into thick bush wearing flip-flops.

Two days ago, on 27 July 2009, the expedition had had an extraordinary breakthrough when the helicopter team spotted a lone giant sable from the air and darted it – the first ever. When they landed and ran up to the drugged animal, a large male, Morkel held back. 'You should be first,' he told Vaz Pinto, who knelt down and held the fallen bull's head up by its massive horns and gently patted his sleek, horse-like cheeks.

Vaz Pinto is not aboard today, so I get to be embedded with the capture team. He's meeting with the Angolan Air Force in Malanje, the provincial capital, to arrange for a troop transport helicopter to be on standby to fly a giant sable bull from Luando to the fenced breeding sanctuary being built in Cangandala. Up front is Nito Rochas, a keen-eyed Angolan birder and the son of a professional hunter, who studies the ground below through his half-tinted glasses. I'm crammed in the back with Morkel, his rifle and an imposing array of immobilising drugs and needle-nosed darts.

Less than an hour after takeoff, Rochas shouts '*Palanca negra*!' and stabs a finger vigorously in the direction of a lone black bull in the distance. O'Hara sees him too, and powers in a low loop toward the *grande macho* (big male). As the antelope grudgingly trots off I can see the full curve of its horns in profile. Then it turns, defiantly standing its ground under a wispy tree. 'At this stage,' Morkel says dryly, 'he's telling us "fuck you".' As we close in, the sable moves toward thicker bush instead of a nearby clearing where he'd present a much clearer target. 'I'll try and turn him,' O'Hara's voice squawks.

Morkel goes into overdrive, whips off his coat and thrusts it at me to keep it from flying out, and works feverishly to prepare his darts. Most vets think it's absolutely nuts to juggle these deadly drugs in the tight confines of a swooping helicopter. But Morkel likes to tailor the dose to the size of the animal – in this case a 220-kilogram ungulate – and uses a syringe to draw out seven milligrams ▶

OPPOSITE Seemingly empty of life, the parched miombo forest of Angola's Luando Strict Nature Reserve stretches out beneath the helicopter.

BOTTOM Veterinarian Pete Morkel is never without his tool kit of tranquillisers, medical equipment and DNA sampling supplies.

BELOW Biologist Pedro Vaz Pinto holds the horns of the very first sable bull to be tranquillised, darted and collared.

KALUNGA LIMA

Songo people living near Cangandala National Park have a traditional reverence for the giant sable. Vaz Pinto has hired many as 'shepherds' to track the herds and monitor poaching.

of etorphine, an opioid 3 000 times more powerful than morphine. The tiniest drop on human skin is fatal. He adds four milligrams of azaperone – a tranquilliser – from the collection of bottles in his toolbox, injects the narcotic cocktail into a dart, loads the rifle with a .22 blank, cocks the weapon and yanks off his headphones. He leans out where a door would normally be, straining against his seatbelt as O'Hara dives down perilously low and tilts the chopper to give him a close shot.

The bull refuses to budge but O'Hara hovers just above the treeline, spraying it with a dust storm of forest debris. It breaks into a gallop, and Morkel aims at his solidly muscled rump as we drop down. The sable swerves as he fires and the tiny projectile flies between the hind legs. The vet, who rarely misses, explodes with a burst of profanity, grabbing syringes, bottles and .22 shells to whip up another dose. We may have to abort the chase. You can't stress the animal to the point at which it would be staggering and slobbering; he'd react badly to the drug.

Literally sick from excitement – and the side effects of anti-malarial medication and O'Hara's tree-hopping airshow manoeuvres – I pull a plastic bag off my digital camera and retch into it. O'Hara and Morkel zoom down on their quarry. ('There he is!', 'Stay with him!', 'Got 'im!') O'Hara lands the chopper in a tiny clearing, flattening the burnt bushes with the rotor wash and hitting the ground with branch-snapping finality. Morkel and Rochas race towards the staggering animal. O'Hara stays to cool down the turbine engine.

Still woozy, I climb down from the helicopter and stumble off into a blur of yellow and grey bush. O'Hara honks and gestures wildly. I move off again, my head clearing, and scramble over a tree-covered termite mound to see the big beast in the golden grass, its legs tucked under, panting heavily.

Rochas holds a leather radio-collar in his hand while Morkel rifles through his toolbox. O'Hara arrives and hugs the groggy sable's horns to his own chest to hold the animal's head up but nose down to aid its breathing. Morkel blindfolds the unblinking eyes, twists out the dart and daubs the blood-welling wound.

After years of suppressed hope, I can hardly believe that I'm touching the knurled curves and polished tips of a living *palanca negra gigante*'s horns and sliding a hand down his heaving, coarse-furred black flanks and bristling mane. But there's little time to admire him. Ideally, Morkel likes no more than 30 minutes to elapse between darting an animal and watching it walk away – it's more important to revive it quickly than handle it gently. Getting the radio-collar on is top priority; if the animal starts to recover and has to be let go, it can be tracked by its VHF or GPS/GSM signal.

Next, Morkel checks its age. Judging from tooth wear, the bull is about nine years old, and in good condition despite clusters of ticks next to his lower mane,

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a spot he can't easily rub against a tree or back-scratch with his scimitar-shaped horns – they're too long. O'Hara measures the outside curve with a steel tape: 1.37 metres. Impressive as that is, the longest giant sable horns on record are an amazing 1.65 metres or 65 inches.

Morkel pinches a pair of colour-coded plastic ear tags in place with a tool the size of a large paper punch, then slices off one ear tip and drops it into a sample jar with a folded leaf to avoid contaminating its DNA. He finishes by spray-painting a large red X on each side of the hindquarters, and also spraying the horn tips. These colourful ▶

A CENTURY OF UNCERTAINTY

1909 Frank Varian, a British engineer in charge of constructing a railway from Angola's Atlantic coast to the Belgian Congo, is ridiculed for reporting that sable antelopes with record-length horns can be found in the interior.

1916 Varian supplies specimens to the British Natural History Museum. The giant sable is recognised as a sable subspecies: *Hippotragus niger variani*.

1922

Varian persuades Portuguese colonial authorities to declare the giant sable 'royal game', requiring special permission to shoot. Even so, the antelope is eagerly sought by museum collectors and trophy hunters.

1938 The Luando Strict Nature Reserve is created, encompassing the giant sable's known habitat and giving it partial protection.

1949

Spanish hunter Count de Yebes shoots a giant sable carrying record-length horns: 1.65 metres or 65 inches.

1954 Quentin Keynes, the great-grandson of Charles Darwin, meets Varian (below, right) and takes the first motion pictures of giant sable.

1963

A small population of giant sable is discovered in what is now Cangandala National Park, north of the Luando Reserve.

1969 American field researchers Richard and Runi Estes begin a year-long study of giant sable in Luando and Cangandala. They estimate a total population of 2 500 animals.

1975 Angola gains independence from Portugal and a devastating civil war breaks out. It lasts 27 years.

2001

The author accompanies Professor Wouter van Hoven of the University of Pretoria on a helicopter flight over Cangandala. No giant sables are seen.

2002 After the end of the civil war, Estes and Walker participate in a brief reconnaissance of Cangandala organised by Van Hoven. Tracks are found, but no photographs are taken. Sceptics doubt the giant sable has survived the conflict.

2003 Biologist Pedro Vaz Pinto of the Catholic University of Angola leads a survey expedition into Cangandala. The team finds poachers have been active inside the unstaffed park.

2004

Vaz Pinto and biologist Jeremy Anderson help organise a joint Angolan/South African effort to conduct microlight aircraft flights over the Luando Reserve. The expedition suffers a plane crash. No photographs of the animal are taken, but dung samples are recovered. Soon after, Vaz Pinto hires locals as 'shepherds' to look for herds in Cangandala and monitor poaching, and sets up remote cameras near natural salt licks.

2005

Vaz Pinto retrieves 16 images of giant sables, the first in more than two decades. The photos are hailed as proof of the species' survival.

2006

Analysis of remote camera images shows that the park's populations of giant sable and roan have been reduced to remnants, and that the survivors are interbreeding, dooming the giant sables.

2008 Vaz Pinto raises funds and organises an expedition to collar some of the remaining giant sables. The author, Estes and veterinarian Pete Morkel join. The effort fails. As there is no direct evidence that there are any giant sable left in Luando Reserve, the outlook for Angola's national animal is grim.

1909 — 2008

BARNEY O'HARA

MINUTES LATER THE YOUNG BULL, AS SLEEK AS A SHOW PONY, is collared, checked and trotting unsteadily into the bush

markings won't last long in the bush, but they'll keep us from re-darting an animal by mistake in the coming days.

The antidote takes only two minutes to work. 'Back off now,' Morkel cautions unnecessarily. Some sables stagger to their feet like angry drunks and take half-hearted swings at nothing in particular. A few emerge from their fog fighting, kicking and slashing viciously with their horn tips. This bull tries to get up, slips, then stands and stumbles off, shaking his head.

We climb back in the chopper. There's still enough fuel left for us to push deeper into the reserve. A short time later we're awed by the sight of seven 'bachelor' bulls – males who have yet to fight successfully for their own female herds – clustered in a stand of thin trees. They start moving off, breaking into a gallop across the ashen landscape, raising clouds of dust under their hooves like fleeing mustangs. Most are carrying horns the size of the individual we've just collared but two are much bigger, one leading the pack with his head and huge arcs of horn held level as he stretches out his stride.

'That's got to be a 60-incher in the lead,' O'Hara's voice crackles. 'Should we take him?' 'Easier to get the young one lagging behind,' Morkel shouts back.

The chopper veers precipitously to the left in a staccato roar and I'm left clutching at jackets and cameras and keeping the vet's drug stash from sliding off the seat. Morkel leans down and I hear a sharp bang. Minutes later the young bull, as sleek as a show pony, is collared, checked and trotting unsteadily into the bush.

We're now low on fuel and fly to an isolated village on the edge of the reserve where additional supplies have been cached. It looks as if the entire population, from children to elders, has spilled out of the thatched-roof mudbrick houses to greet our arrival. Rochas speaks in animated Portuguese to the *soba*, or traditional chief. A scrawny yellow dog perks up its ears, and the curious crowd looks skyward towards a deep droning in the distance. A hulking, green Russian-built Angolan Air Force MI-8 appears and descends, its downwash driving the fleeing villagers back with the ferocity of a sandstorm.

Pedro Vaz Pinto emerges from the belly of the helicopter with a cadre of military personnel. The 41-year-old Lisbon-trained biologist has been here before – arriving less dramatically by quad bike – and is surrounded by the elders. He breaks away and joins us while we refuel for the flight back to camp.

'It's all settled,' he says, taking off his familiar floppy leather hat and running a hand through his curly black hair. On the day we're ready, he explains, the military helicopter and crew will carry a giant sable bull from here to Cangandala. We unroll a survey map and recount our morning's accomplishments.

'That means we're down to two collars,' he says, frowning.

O'Hara laughs. 'Did you ever think you'd say, "you're darting too many *palancas*"?'

Vaz Pinto flashes a quick smile. But he's not ready to celebrate yet. It's taken an entire century just to get to this point. ■

Part two of 'Antelope from the Ashes' will be featured in the July 2010 issue of Africa Geographic.