

# PH Spotlight

## Mark Vallaro

### Practice and Effort Make the Hunt Great

CHIFUTI SAFARIS  
PROFESSIONAL HUNTER  
MARK VALLARO IS  
ONE OF TODAY'S MOST  
RECOGNIZED FACES  
IN THE WORLD OF  
AFRICAN HUNTING, AND  
ESPECIALLY IN HIS HOME  
COUNTRY OF ZIMBABWE.  
A LEADING MAN ON MANY  
EPISODES OF "TRACKS  
ACROSS AFRICA" AND  
"DARK AND DANGEROUS,"  
AS WELL AS SPECIES-  
FOCUSED DVD RELEASES  
BY SAFARI CLASSICS  
PRODUCTIONS, VALLARO  
HAS BEEN GIVEN THE  
UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO  
SHARE HIS EXPERTISE  
AND PASSION WITH AN  
EVER-GROWING AUDIENCE.



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*Vallaro and family: wife, Michelle, daughters Sophie and Sienna.*

#### **What do you wish a first-time dangerous game client knew before arriving?**

To know clients understand both the capabilities of their rifle and, even more important, their own ability with it. Accurate shooting is a learned skill – there is little luck involved. You are not born with it, do not inherit it, and must earn it over the years with practice. Never quit practicing your shooting, and, yes, that means PHs too!

#### **How often do things go about as planned?**

Plans? Ha ha! Never. You start with a plan, sure, but a large percentage of the time Plan A falls down on you. A veteran PH will be skilled at making new plans on the fly, based on everything from past experience to gut feeling. Until a young PH develops that ability, he will be left in the dust. "Expect the unexpected" is a solid bit of advice.

#### **Who and how many people make up your best DG hunting team?**

Douglas, my driver; Duly, one of the best hoofed-game trackers I have ever seen; and

Tinos, my head tracker. Tinos is a master at elephants, as well as lions and leopards. In addition, Tinos has absolutely no fear, or at least has hid it from me on some very hairy occasions. A PH is only as good as his team, and I am very blessed to have these brave and skillful men on mine.

#### **What turns a good client into a great client?**

Some show up with a record book in one hand and a tape measure in the other – always signs of a tough time ahead. The ones that actually enjoys working for the game is something I greatly appreciate in a client. There will be good days and hard days on safari. You will experience great highs, as well as heartbreak and disappointment at times. It is all part of the experience. The ability to roll with the punches leads to a happy camp in my opinion.

#### **Do clients do a "starter" safari on plains game, but then "graduate" for a second trip? Or do you have clients who want to do it all?**

I have hunted both types of clients. Problems can arise when a client comes on an expensive,

full-bag safari, but lacks much, if any, hunting/shooting experience.

Just because an animal is on quota is no guarantee that it will end up in the skinning shed. I believe that building up to dangerous game is best done by having at least one plains game trip under your belt. The more experience you have under your belt, the better when you're taking on game that can kill you. On the other hand, I have hunted folks with a lot of North American game experience, but no African, who hit the ground ready to go and performed flawlessly.

### **What was the best thing about your first dangerous game hunt, either as a pro or on your own?**

A loooong time ago, I was guiding my first Cape buffalo client. We hunted like hell for nine days before we got a bull. I remember both happiness and relief. But the effort was what made it so special for both the client and me. It drove home the lesson that you must push hard until you lose daylight on the last day. A lot of great trophies in my career came very late in the safari, and many clients said, upon reflection, that it was the effort they remember most, not the scoresheet.

### **What was the worst?**

Not being able to, for whatever reason, get a good, hard-working client the chance at a trophy he came too far to find. Every PH feels the same, I bet.

### **Besides not finding an appropriate and legal animal, are there any reasons you would back away from a hunt, or a shot?**

If the situation was too dangerous for the hunting party, especially my client. Tuskless elephants come to mind. Multiple charges are possible in the middle of a worked-up cow herd, and the risk is not worth the reward. A good retreat always beats a bad stand.

### **What is your favorite dangerous game species and why?**

Leopard. Hands down. End of discussion. It's a thinking hunter's game. Trying to outsmart a mature tom leopard – so that he comes to a place of your choosing, at a time you can see him, to claim meat he knows he didn't kill – is the ultimate chess game. There is no rush in the safari game quite like when your leopard comes in. I will never tire of it.

### **What's the best advice you received as you were growing up and doing PH apprenticeship? Who are your mentors and heroes?**

I was taught The Seven P's: Proper Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance. As for personal mentors, Chifuti Safaris Andrew Dawson influenced my leopard hunting more than any other, and the late, great Ian "Gibbo" Gibson taught me lessons that got me through my early years, the hardest for a new PH. I owe a great debt to each.

### **What are your experiences with poaching, anti-poaching and anti-hunting efforts?**

In the Zambezi Valley, elephant poaching was mostly isolated. But in the Zimbabwe Lowveld, there used to be a ton of meat poaching. Dogs and wire snares were the tools used, and they can simply wipe out wildlife in an area left unchecked. The waste, not to mention the inhumane suffering inflicted on animals, was staggering to see. Without hunting, and the value it places on the

game, it will be the fate of all of Africa's wildlife.

Several years ago, I was called in to deal with several man-eating lions. It just so happens that the area those lions were operating in was being poached flat by locals. Lions exist on meat. I hope some of their victims were the ones that set snares. Poaching is the scourge of Africa.

### **Do you have favorite DG guns, optics and gear?**

My working rifle is a Heym .470 double. It is truly my life insurance policy. For a PH, the ability to deliver two big bullets instantly on game, either wounded and departing, or wounded and charging, can be the difference between walking back to the Land Cruiser or being carried back in a bloody blanket. Nothing takes the place of a double rifle when dangerous game is your business. My Heym fits me like a shotgun, and I shoot mostly on instinct nowadays. I have stopped charges with this rifle that I know full well I could have not pulled off with a bolt rifle. As long as I'm in this game, this is the working rifle I will carry.

### **What do you do on holiday?**

I like wild places and game parks like Mana Pools. I enjoy, even in my off time being in the company of game. I want my two girls, Sophie and Sienna, to see and appreciate animals, as well.

I love photography, as does my wife, Michelle. Fishing is up there on my fun list, especially tiger fishing on the Zambezi. My wife enjoys trout more, and we both fly fish at Trout Beck in eastern Zimbabwe. I enjoy the fly rod quite a bit actually.

### **If she was willing, would you take your mother on a dangerous game hunt, and would you be her PH?**

Ha, Ha, Ha! That is the trick question of all time. No, I don't see that happening. She is not a hunter, so a hunting safari is not in her future. Hunting with a camera? She has been on walking safaris with me before, and a buff in her lens is more her style. In a scope? Nope.

### **If you knew you had just 10 days left on the planet, what would you do with that time?**

Take my wife and kids to the beach so I can enjoy watching them splash in the surf and play in the sand. GT

