

~~DISCUSSION:off~~

# Campfires

The ashes of countless camp fires scattered all over Southern Africa, bring back nostalgic memories of a hunter's wanderings in an era gone by – mud covered buffalo in the Okavango swamps<sup>1)</sup> of Botswana, proud kudu<sup>2)</sup> bulls in the mopani thickets of Namibia, graceful oryx<sup>3)</sup> amongst the red dunes of the Kalahari and pronking<sup>4)</sup> herds of springbuck<sup>5)</sup> in the endless spaces of the Great Karoo<sup>6)</sup>.



A campfire is more than just a flame over which to cook a meal. It warms the hands in the predawn of a winter's day and is the source of heat in a mug of hot, black coffee. It gives freely of its companionship at sunset, is a welcome beacon to the tired hunter returning to camp at dusk and a comfort to the weary of soul. Watching the flames of a hardwood fire dance as they hiss and crackle and scatter sparks into the night is an inseparable part of any hunting experience. It is when the fire dies down however that the mesmerizing effect of the red coals causes the mind's inward eye to travel back along the paths of yesteryear, to recall those special hunts and perhaps long forgotten friends.

## Of Trees and Wood

Hardwood obviously makes the best fires. The flames burn brighter and the resulting coals are hotter and longer lasting. Each region in South Africa has its own favourite hardwood tree, depending on the indigenous trees growing in the area. Mopani's<sup>7)</sup> in Namibia and the Northern Bushveld, Camel Thorn<sup>8)</sup> in the Kalahari, Wild Plum in the Eastern Cape and the ubiquitous Acacia Thorn<sup>9)</sup> in both the Greater and Lesser Karoo. The pros and cons of these hardwoods are often hotly debated around barbeque fires but there is unanimous consensus that the Leadwood Tree<sup>10)</sup> of the Eastern Lowveld is the ultimate hardwood.

There is, however, a second tree in the Lowveld, whose wood has been used in error by the uninitiated camper, with less happy results. The Tamboti (*Spirostachys africana*<sup>11)</sup>), has a dark heartwood, which frequently leads to it being used in open fire cooking. The wood, however, contains a natural "oil" that is extremely toxic. Food cooked over a Tamboti fire causes vomiting and diarrhoea, an experience not lightly forgotten.

Trees form an integral part of the outdoor experience and are therefore worthy of discussion. Take as an example the Sausage Tree (*Kigelia africana*<sup>12)</sup>) They grow to large sizes and provide excellent shade. They also bear enormous sausage-like fruit, as much as sixty centimeters in length and weighing anything from five to ten kilograms. Therein lies the rub. We were hunting buffalo in the Okavango and were camped under a stand of these trees. We were gathered around the camp fire and did not notice the large missiles threatening us from overhead. A ripe fruit released itself and came hurtling from up high, accompanied by much banging and crashing. We were able to follow its progress by sound but not judge its trajectory so we scattered. Luckily, it fell between us without causing injury which was just as well because we were a long way from medical help.



In the Northern region of the Kruger National Park and also some tropical areas of Natal, grows an exceptional tree, called the Fever Tree (*Vachellia xanthophloea*). It occurs in groves and develops long, straight trunks with very few side branches. Its bark is lime green and smooth. Incidentally, malaria is also endemic to the areas in which they occur. Early hunter/explorers who camped under these trees and contracted malaria, erroneously associated the colour of the bark with the yellow pallor of malaria patients and promptly named them Fever Trees. Science has since corrected this misconception but the name has stuck.



The Marula (*Sclerocarya birrea*<sup>13)</sup>) is another Bushveld tree that is interesting and worthy of attention for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it bears yellow apricot-sized fruit that are rich in vitamin C. Urban legend has it that elephants consume large quantities of the overripe fruit and become intoxicated. This is simply not true. What I can confirm though is that women of the Shangaan tribe create a very refreshing beverage from this fruit - somewhat tangy but delightful on the palate when chilled. Commerce has latched onto the idea and nowadays the fruit is harvested and processed to produce a delicious Marula Cream Liqueur. Last but not least, the fleshy bark of the Marula can be steeped in boiling water to form a tea that counteracts diarrhea very effectively. This also, I can confirm through personal experience.

## Fire

What happens if the means of making fire is not at hand? A shrub called the Turpentine Bush is found at the foot of the mountains bordering the Kalahari. Scraping the bark produces a fine, resinous ball of fibre. A piece of soft iron struck against a flint stone produces a glowing spark that, directed to fall on the resinous material, can be gently blown into a flame. It takes trial and error and lots of patience but, in an emergency, it works. In the absence of a turpentine bush, any other resinous tree or shrub will probably do as well.



For the hunter there is however an easier method available. Gather sufficient dry tinder and firewood together. Place the tinder against a stone backdrop or make a hollow in the sand. Pull the bullet from a rifle cartridge and pour the powder at the base of the dry tinder. Place the "empty" shell in the rifle, hold the muzzle against the powder, and pull the trigger. The resultant flash from the live cap retained in the shell, will ignite the powder and tinder. This method of making fire is effective but extremely hazardous and must be executed with great caution. A warning - do not demonstrate this method to children.

There are various tricks worth trying when struggling with damp wood. If dry tinder is difficult to find, look for birds' nests that are stoutly built and therefore dry on the inside. Alternatively, try the bark on the Northfacing portion of a tree trunk - South facing in the Northern hemisphere. Being fully exposed to the rays of the sun, the bark will normally be drier on that side than on the rest of the tree.



When you have a nice fire going, sit back and enjoy the flames as they dance and leap about. Let them mesmerize you as you listen to them hiss, crackle and shoot sparks at you - but ware the creatures that crawl out of the wood when the heat gets to them. Scorpions, snakes and all sorts of creepy crawlies make hollow logs their home. Believe me, a scorpion sting is something you will remember for a very long time.

1)

 Okavango Delta

2)

 kudu

3)

 oryx

4)

 Stotting

5)

 Springbok

6)

 Karoo#Great\_Karoo

7)

 Mopane

8)

 [Vachellia erioloba](#)

9)

 [Acacia karroo](#)

10)

 [Combretum imberbe](#)

11)

 [Spirostachys africana](#)

12)

 [Kigelia](#)

13)

 [Sclerocarya birrea](#)

From:

<http://www.vanderlindes.net/> - **van der Linde family**

Permanent link:

[http://www.vanderlindes.net/books/hunter/chapter\\_02](http://www.vanderlindes.net/books/hunter/chapter_02)

Last update: **22/03/2019 18:32**

