



# JUDGE HAS GAME

BY PETER VAIRA

He is a city boy. Raised in New York City, he came to Philadelphia to practice law and became a federal judge. In his off time, he hunts big game in Canada, South Africa, the Rocky Mountains and the woodlands of Pennsylvania. He hunts like the Iroquois, with bow and arrow, albeit with a modern version called a compound bow.

This is not the lead from a Hollywood movie script. This is real. This is Judge Berle Schiller of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, who is both a dedicated jurist and a serious hunter. His chambers are decorated with mounted heads of the game he has hunted: a caribou from Canada, a wildebeest from Africa, a pronghorn antelope from Wyoming, a warthog from Africa and two whitetail bucks from Pennsylvania. These are big game on the hoof and it requires skill and physical stamina to hunt them. A live caribou weighs up to 350 pounds, the wildebeest up to 500 pounds. The pronghorn antelope is considered the fastest moving animal in the western hemisphere with running speed of up to 55 mph. In his home, Judge Schiller has the mounted heads from his last African trip: a kudu, two impala, an eland and a wildebeest.

Judge Schiller started hunting by chance when he filed a court case in Berks County in the early 1970s and needed local counsel. The local counsel asked if he liked to hunt, and city-born-and-raised Schiller said there wasn't much opportunity for hunting in the five boroughs of New York City. Local counsel helped him get a license and started him on small game, rabbits and pheasants. He liked the experience of spending long periods of time outdoors in the rugged country, and a few years later went to Cumberland County to hunt deer. He hunted deer for nearly eight years with a rifle before he went on a trip with Club Med to a resort in the Dominican Republic. The resort offered a variety of sports, one of which was archery. He took lessons for one week and quickly learned that archery is not a sport for softies, but requires physically strong, active persons, especially the hunters, who must learn to act like the forest Indians. Judge Schiller said he hunts

PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jeff Lyons



by waiting for long periods of time in a blind, or by quietly stalking the dense Pennsylvania woods, the stark barren sub-Arctic of Canada, the rugged Rocky Mountains of the American west, or the wild African bush. Most times he hunts alone, as the bow hunter must quietly get in close vicinity of his wary, fast-footed targets before drawing and shooting an arrow.

Judge Schiller often produces his four-pound compound bow for a visitor to his chambers for a bit of show and tell. He explains that a hunter using this type of bow must get within 40 yards of his target. It requires a pull the equivalent of lifting 60 pounds in order to draw the arrow. When released, this bow shoots an arrow at 250 feet a second. The hunter gets one shot. If he misses, the animal is long gone.

Judge Schiller explains that bow hunting causes him to completely concentrate his senses on his surroundings – the wind, and the movement of the grass and trees as he slowly walks through the woods, often stopping so as not to spook a wary deer or antelope. He may also sit in a blind or tree stand for hours, waiting for an animal to appear. In deer season in Pennsylvania it is often cold, and the ground may be snow covered. In the bush country of Africa, the high grasses are dry and the air is hot. [On a clear day, hawks and vultures circle overhead. This is where one gets a true appreciation of nature, he says.] In the off-season, he often surveys the Pennsylvania deer hunting areas on foot for hours, in order to learn the places where the deer feed and their travel patterns, to enable him to better pursue them on a hunt.

Hunting caribou was particularly demanding. Two years ago, Judge Schiller flew two hours from Montreal to northern Quebec to a remote area of Kuujjuaq, and from there flew in a four-seat float plane to an unnamed area on a lake an hour and a half northwest. He described the area as desolate like the moon, except with water all around. There was one lone building. Even in the summer there was little vegetation and permafrost one foot below the surface. Visitors have described the immense silence of the tundra as all-powerful. The caribou move across this stark land in large herds during migration season. The guide took him across an ice-cold lake in a small boat to a desolate island where he was able to track down the bull caribou whose head is mounted on the wall in his chambers.

Hunting in South Africa is the stuff of Ernest Hemingway, which Hemingway described in his books, “The Green Hills

of Africa,” and “True at First Light.” Judge Schiller points out that Hemingway was not a bow hunter, but used a powerful rifle. Hunting in South Africa is not a forest hunt. There are wide-open plains, with large grasses and brush. The game is antelope, wildebeest, kudu, impalas, sables and warthogs. Lions, cheetahs and leopards stalk these animals for food. There are some hunters who go after the big cats with a bow, but these cats are a very wary target, making it difficult to approach near enough for a bow shot. Judge Schiller was not interested in hunting the big cats. He said, “In a lion hunt, the bow hunter is accompanied by two guides with high-powered rifles to back up the hunter in case his bow shot misses or only slightly wounds the animal. The angered lion will then come after the bow hunter, and the two guides must kill the lion. That is not my idea of the sport of hunting.”

In Africa, Judge Schiller proceeds on foot with a guide through the high grasses, or sets up a blind in the brush to watch for the antelope or wildebeest or other fast animals. He needs to be within 40 yards of the animal to strike it effectively. He gets one shot.

Judge Schiller emphasizes he does not hunt endangered species. He hunts animals also hunted by other natural predators, such as wolves in North America or the big cats in Africa. He points out that, in Pennsylvania, there are not enough natural predators to control the deer population that is destroying the small vegetation that is essential food for small animals. He said none of the meat from the animals he kills is wasted, but is eaten by him and the other hunters or given to a local food bank.

Roy DeCaro, a Philadelphia lawyer, and a fellow bow hunter, describes the anomaly of Judge Schiller, as a bow hunter. He knows the judge as a “Type A” personality, who is organized and adheres to schedules and plans. “Bow hunting is a totally opposite routine for the judge. He can’t control the timing, can’t make an animal appear, or come within range. He can sit for hours in a blind without a target appearing,” DeCaro said.

For Judge Schiller, hunting is more than a sport. It is a passion for the outdoor, with its complete silence, its serenity and, most of all, the opportunity to watch the great wildlife creatures doing what they have done for thousands of years. ■

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