



Time to reflect: Rupert Fothergill and Crackers take a break from chasing wildlife.

Crackers of Kariba

By Bill Higham

IT WAS a tense moment. Rupert Fothergill and his men were fanned out across the summit of the granite kopje, the rising waters of the Zambesi River set to swamp the island. The trouble was, telling that to a 40-strong herd of buffalo caught in the tail-end of this man-made flood of biblical proportions.

The wildlife team's task was to force the herd into the water and 'muster' it to the mainland by 'herding' it from two outboard-powered boats.

Left alone, the animals would be swamped by the rising water and, unable to find their bearings, most would drown from exhaustion trying to find dry land.

The problem was - time. There were further islands, more trapped game, yet the tried-and-tested tactic of forming a skirmish line and 'beating' the herd into an ever-decreasing corner of the island and from there into the water - was going nowhere.

This herd was led by an old bullet-scarred, stubborn bull. There is nothing more dangerous in the African bush than a bull buffalo with a healthy hatred for man. Rupert knew this only too well as man and beast stared at each other across 30 yards of tall savannah grass, destined shortly to become the muddy bottom of the (then) biggest man-made lake in the world. "Bass up, boss," a Shona game scout warned.

Rupert nodded wearily. The only trees on the island were the tall, straight mopane, the iron wood of Africa, not an easy tree to climb in a hurry.

He glanced regretfully down at his rifle. If the old bull charged there would be nothing for it.

Lion tamer: Fothergill with a trapped lioness



Those curved horns could impale and toss a grown man 10 feet into the air. And there was no point in drugging the buffalo with a rifle-fired dart.

They needed him to lead his herd to the mainland.

It was a touch and go situation as Rupert pondered on the alternatives. Suddenly the grass in front exploded as something - like a torpedo rippling the surface of the sea - headed straight for the old bull.

"What the ...?"

Rupert looked around. Then realised it must be - had to be - the little stray dachshund they had picked up a few days earlier.

The little sausage dog, left behind by tourists maybe, had become a camp follower and between Rupert and ranger Tinkey Haslam had grown an amicable rivalry for rights to become the unnamed hound's 'human'.

"Where the hell ..." This from Tinkey.

The buffalo thrust its giant head into the grass to scare off the approaching 'torpedo' and - forgive the cliché but nothing explains it better - all hell broke loose.

The buffalo roared with pain and threw its head and horns high on its rippling black shoulders, the little dog flapping on the end of

its huge nose like a limp bown rag.

There was a stunned silence from the game department men.

With the little dog's jaws clamped onto his big black snout and, unable to shake him off, the enraged buffalo turned and made a strategic bolt for the water.

A full-throated cheer went up from the men as the herd, bellowing and kicking, followed its leader. As the bull hit the water the little dog let go, cartwheeling into the water, swimming frantically to avoid the smashing hooves of the herd.

He made it ashore, shook himself, and looked up at Rupert as though to say, "How'd I do?"

Rupert picked up the wet little dog and cradled him in his arms. Nearby, Tinkey Haslam shook his head, grinned, and uttered the immortal words, "He's crackers."

And a legend was born.

Crackers became Operation Noah's unofficial mascot, riding on the bow of Rupert's boat around the diminishing islands of the lake, alerting the men to trapped snakes, distracting peeved and drug-darted lions while the men dropped nets from trees, snapping at the heels of disgruntled rhinos and generally making himself indispensable in the continuing rescue of Lake Kariba's trapped game.

Postscript - 'Who's Crackers?'

In 1964 Marangora wildlife station was situated northeast of the Chirundu Bridge road (opposite side of the road to today's station).

Perched on the lip of the Zambesi escarpment and overlooking the tangled lowveld Zambesi Valley, one of the last strongholds of African game, Marangora was Crackers' retirement home, living with Senior Ranger Tinkey Haslam and his wife, Margaret, and was a daily visitor to the office block below quarters hill, spending time each day with my father, Jack, the station's tourist officer.

One day in March, Crackers alerted staff to a cobra in the grass and, slowing down with age, took a bite for his trouble.

I reached Marangora the next day, fresh from London. Dad came up from the office and told mum heavily, "Crackers died this morning."

I saw mum's look of anguish and asked, "Who was Crackers?"

And so the tale began ...