

INTO THE THORNS BY WAYNE MICHAEL GRANT

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It has been a while since I have been as pleasantly surprised by a book as I was with Wayne Michael Grant's *Into the Thorns*. Grant, a former officer in the crack Rhodesian Light Infantry who turned to professional hunting after Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, managed in my humble opinion to write an extremely well-balanced book that deals not only with some action-packed (and at times gory) leopard hunting stories but touches on a whole range of modern-day conservation issues that concerns the leopard in Southern Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular.

As the subtitle of the book suggests, outwitting the huge cattle-killing leopards of the Matobo hills forms the main subject matter of the book. The Matobo hills near Bulawayo in Zimbabwe where, incidentally, Cecil John Rhodes lies buried to this day on a hilltop called *Malindidzimu* (meaning "World's View") with a magnificent view over the Matobo National Park, consists of very rugged thornveld interspersed liberally with rocky outcrops that provides the perfect habitat for the Matobo leopard. Before Robert Mugabe's disastrous land invasions of 2000, this area was a prime cattle ranching area that produced some of the top-quality beef that Zimbabwe was once famous for. The inevitable conflict between the cattle ranchers and the leopards provided the impetus for much of the leopard hunting described in the book and Wayne Grant's descriptions of hunting these wily old leopards, many of them used to man and his ways, makes for thrilling reading.

As I have mentioned, this is not a book dealing purely with wounded leopards and mauled PH's, although there is enough action packed into its 570 pages to provide plenty of excitement. Grant also takes the reader on an interesting trip down memory lane as he recounts some of his adventures at boarding school in the very same Matobo hills that would later become his favourite area for hunting leopard. There are also chapters introducing the author's loyal trackers and other staff (without whom most of the hunting would not have been possible), others dealing with plains game hunting and snakes, as well as a chapter recounting a number of interesting and humorous experiences with clients over the years.

The most sobering aspect of the whole book for me, though, was the chapters dealing with the current conservation status of the leopard and the influence of both hound hunting as well as over-exploitation of the leopard in modern-day Zimbabwe. Wayne Grant pulls no punches and his views on where leopard hunting, not only in Zimbabwe but in other prime locations such as Tanzania, should be heading will not sit comfortable with many. However, for a senior PH such as Wayne Grant to speak out in such a manner surely takes guts, especially when viewed in light of the fact that some of his views flies in the face of a lot of modern-day conventions concerning the leopard. Irrespective of whether one agrees with him or not, he is to be applauded for this.

Into the Thorns is written in an easy-going, nice-to-read style that continually keeps the reader occupied. It is liberally illustrated with photographs and sketches, and if I may offer a slight criticism on this score, some of the photographs are not always printed near the stories behind them. This at times caused me to page to different areas in the book, sometimes in mid-story, but it is a minor criticism that in no way detracts from a very fine book. At times funny, at times sad, but always interesting and never dull, *Into the Thorns* is heartily recommended as a very fine read for anybody interested in hunting the leopard.

Into the Thorns is published in hard-cover by Mag-Set Publications and is available from Zimbi Books in Pretoria.