

Anna Lea Stewart pictured with her father, Wayne Stewart, Jr., a Life Member of the Mississippi Bowhunters Association.



# The Best Graduation Gift

STORY & PHOTOS BY ANNA LEA STEWART

**E**ver since I can remember, my dad had promised to bring me along on one of his many Africa trips. As a little girl, I begged and begged to tag along. His response was always something along the lines of “Let’s wait till you’re a little older, Anna Lea.” After 18 years of convincing him I was ready, I finally

talked him into taking me on my first African hunt. This was my graduation present from my dad, and as you can imagine I was overwhelmed with excitement!

After spending days planning and packing to make sure I had everything I needed, it was finally time to make our way to the airport. We flew

from Columbus, Mississippi, to our connection flight in Atlanta. It was starting to sink in that I was actually getting to go to South Africa. As we boarded the flight I’d been waiting on since I was a little girl, I could barely contain my excitement. 15 hours later, we arrived in Pretoria, South Africa. We were greeted by my dad’s best



friend Rassie Erasmus. Mr. Rassie took us to his house and we sat in the living room with his family catching up and making plans for the week we had in store. The next morning, we would get up early and head to their family hunting camp.

The 3 hour drive from the city to the camp seemed to fly by. I had

never seen anything like this in my life! As we drove down the back roads towards Limpopo, the mountain scenery was breathtaking.

The first night staying at camp was so awesome. We went for a ride in the ranger and saw so many beautiful animals. I couldn't believe how much game we saw in that one drive. My favorite part of that day, however, was watching my first African sunset. It was so beautiful!

The next morning we had a late breakfast with all kinds of food. The food was great, but all I could think about was finally getting to go on my first hunt in South Africa. After breakfast, it was finally time for me to go hunting! We loaded up the ranger and headed for the ground blind. I was about to hunt for a gemsbok that had been spotted on the game camera several times. I kept going over and over in my mind exactly where to place my shot, because my dad taught me you want to hit African game closer towards the front of the body than you would when aiming on a whitetail. I got to the blind, loaded my crossbow, and waited. The gemsbok never came, but that was fine. The hunt was great because even though I never saw the gemsbok, I got to watch different animals come and drink from the waterhole in front of me. I saw my first nyala, warthogs, and a group of baboons. I learned so much that day and was looking forward to my next hunt.

Several days went by without any blood hitting the ground, but everyday I was learning and becoming a better hunter. However, I couldn't wait to take my first African animal.

As the week progressed, the more excited I became.

Late into the morning of July the twenty-ninth, I finally got my first kill. That morning my hunting guide, Reneoux, had told me about a warthog he had seen the week before from the blind where we were sitting. He explained how it was one of the oldest warthogs he'd seen on this property in a long time, and if this particular one came to drink from the waterhole that I should make a shot. Sure enough, he came to drink. As soon as I saw him I thought my heart was going to beat out of my chest. After he bullied the smaller warthogs for a little while, he began to settle down. I controlled my breathing, raised up my crossbow, and took aim. After slowly squeezing through the trigger, I heard the warthog squeal and watched as he ran into a thicket. He left behind a nice blood trail, and I knew this was a good sign. "Great job, you got him!" Reneoux said to me. In this moment I wanted to do a flip I was so excited! After letting my dad and Mr. Rassie know, we waited for them to come help us track. When they arrived, we went straight to my bolt. It was covered tip to tip in blood. We followed the blood trail for several minutes, and I was praying that we would find him soon. After following the blood deep into the thicket, I spotted my warthog. My dad pulled me in and gave me a big hug and told me he was so proud of me. Reneoux gave me a high five, and Mr. Rassie told me congratulations. I had finally gotten my first African animal, and to say I was excited would be an understatement.

With one of his tusk being broken off at the tip, I knew this was an awesome trophy. I'm so thankful for the opportunity I had to hunt this incredible animal and I will never forget this day for the rest of my life.

The next morning, I was trying for impala in a new spot. After several hours of watching baboons and warthogs come to the water to drink, a group of impala started to make their way into view. I watched and waited for the right ram to get into range. Once again, my heart

was beating fast. I got my excitement under control and continued to wait. I watched as a mature ram walked straight to the waterhole, lowered his head to the water, and began to drink. He was quartering to me. I slowly lifted my crossbow off of the ground and looked through my site. I flipped off the safety, took a deep breath, and squeezed through the trigger. He leaped into the air and ran into a nearby thicket, leaving behind a massive blood trail. After my dad & Mr. Rassie arrived, we followed

the blood into the thicket for about two hundred yards. I looked to my right and saw my impala lying on the ground.

Once again, my dad hugged me and told me he was proud. I had just made a heart shot. We were both so excited. I had just taken two African animals in two days, and I couldn't believe it.

I spent the rest of the hunt chasing a kudu bull, but I never got a shot. When it came time to leave the camp and head back to the airport I



*Anna Lea Stewart pictured with her trophy warthog.*

was devastated. How could ten days possibly fly by so quickly? This had truly been one of the best times of my life, and I hated to see it come to a close.

I'm so thankful to have a dad that passed down a love of hunting to me. Through spending years hunting with me, teaching me, and helping me become the hunter I am today, he's become more than just my dad. He's my best friend. Sharing my first trip to Africa with him will always be one of my favorite hunting memories.

The 10 days I spent hunting in Africa taught me so many things. I'm so grateful for the time I had in such an awesome place, and I can't wait to get back.



*Anna Lea Stewart pictured with the impala she took in Africa.*

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