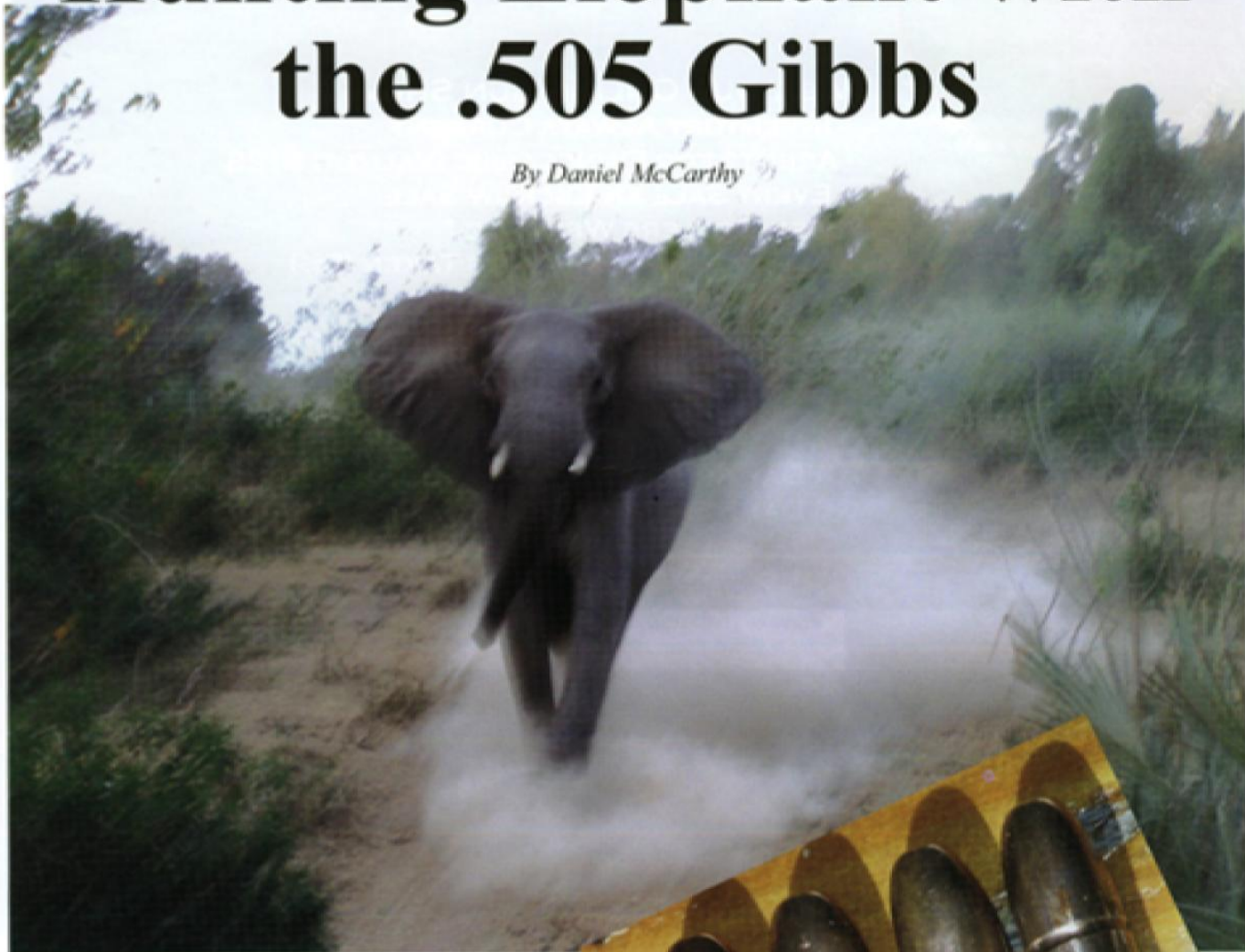




# Hunting Elephant with the .505 Gibbs

By Daniel McCarthy



*“There was no warning trumpet, just a silent rush. Pete and I shouldered our rifles and as the cow cleared a bush at six yards, I let her have a round in the forehead. Instantly she collapsed from the 600 grain Woodleigh FMJ bullet.”*

Woodleigh 600 grain FMJ .505 bullets. The one on the left is unfired, and the other three were recovered from elephant frontal brain shots after penetrating 53 to 55 inches.

Some years ago when I first became interested in elephant hunting, I made a serious mistake. As I looked at top quality big bore bolt action rifles suitable for elephant hunting, I found that they invariably cost more than US\$10,000. Thinking that I could save some money by having rifles built by neighbourhood gunsmiths instead of a top rifle maker, I abandoned the plan to purchase a top end

gun in favour of having one assembled locally for about \$2000. Eight lower-end custom bolt action rifles later, I have finally learned the error of my thinking. There simply is no way to match the feeding, feel, fit, quality, beauty and reliability of a top end bolt gun with a \$2000 budget.

I have always admired the big bore rifles made by rifle maker Ryan Breeding (www.rbbigbores.com). Ryan offers rifles

made to the customer's specifications, but he specializes in big bore dangerous game rifles that are stout, compact, short barreled and have a five shot capacity. Invariably I have found that his rifles are extremely well-balanced and have ultra-smooth actions. Ryan typically uses a new production Granite Mountain Arms double square bridge Mauser action as the basis for his big bore rifles. The GMA action

is fitted with a Model 70 style safety, an Obendorf-style bolt handle, and has a custom magazine box made by Ryan to perfectly feed the cartridge for which the rifle is built.

During a recent hunt, I was fortunate enough to borrow a Ryan Breeding rifle in .505 Gibbs. Like most of Ryan's big bore rifles, this one was built on a double square bridge magnum Mauser action. The action has a 0.750" bolt body diameter which is ample to accommodate the large rim of the Gibbs cartridge. The action rails are also wide enough to accommodate the Gibbs cartridge without stacking the cartridges too narrowly which can create feeding issues. The magazine box and bottom metal which are custom made by Ryan result in a five shot .505 Gibbs rifle. When hunting dangerous game, there is some comfort to be had in having an extra shot or two in the rifle just in case. The stock is made from straight grained English walnut with lots of dark lines and a bit of feathering in the butt. The sights are hand made by Ryan, using an adjustable wide V for the rear and a folding hood front. The sights are very sturdy yet tasteful, making the sights on almost all other rifles look cheap and flimsy. The finished rifle weighs 11.5 pounds with no scope. One could be installed, but a scope is not desirable in such a large calibre. Offhand at 100 yards with iron sights, I could reliably hit a six inch bull, and Ryan can hit a steel pig offhand with the rifle out to 300 yards with the iron sights.

I took Ryan's .505 Gibbs on a cow elephant hunt Zimbabwe's bushveld during September of 2006. The hunt was arranged by Roger Whittall (www.rwsafariss.com), and as I have always found with Roger's company, the hunting was excellent, all details were attended to, and everything went according to plan. Although in September the leaves were off the trees, visibility was limited due to thick jesse and close approaches to elephant were the norm. After some days of not turning up a tuskless elephant, we were fortunate to find a herd with three mature tuskless cow elephant in it. The elephant were spread out and feeding, and as we flanked them for an approach, the wind swirled. One of the tuskless and two junior elephant caught our scent, parted from the herd and ran off. But at a distance of 60 yards, the tuskless turned and came for us. She ran up to a distance of ten yards, stopped and looked at us from behind a bush. I held my fire as I had told my professional hunter, Peter Wood, that I wanted to shoot an elephant a bit closer than an elephant which I took at seven yards the year before.

After watching us for a few moments from behind the bush, the tuskless cow turned and ran off to re-join the herd. Pete whispered "Let's go!" and we followed the tuskless quickly hoping to get a shot before she spooked the whole herd. However,

this tuskless was not new to dealing with humans and instead of re-joining the herd, she was lying in wait for us behind some trees just 25 yards away. As she saw us approach, she charged with her head swinging slightly from side to side. There was no warning trumpet, just a silent rush. Pete and I shouldered our rifles and as the cow cleared a bush at six yards, I let her have a round in the forehead. Instantly she

collapsed from the 600 grain Woodleigh FMJ bullet.

Knowing that the rest of the elephant herd was likely to run off at the sound of gunfire, Pete and I hustled over to where they were bunched beneath a tree, nervous and unsure whether to run immediately or not. We walked up and the matriarch cow came forward to meet us. One great thing about elephant hunting is that elephant will



Charging cow elephant just after the shot but before she drops.



Charging cow elephant dropped from a frontal brain shot.

often come forward to face a challenge from a human, while buffalo usually just run off. Having just faced a full-on charge, I was a bit nervous and got ahead of myself with the matriarch, taking a frontal brain shot on her at 12 yards rather than letting her come as close as possible. My next shot took the third tuskless from the herd, and the rest of the elephants crashed off through the jesse, leaving us to ponder the downed elephant in the dust and the sun.

Just four hours later, the safari company staff had all of the elephant skinned, cut up and loaded onto a wagon so that the meat could be distributed to locals. Not being one to miss lunch, however, I took the liberty of borrowing the PH's knife (since I am too lazy to carry one myself) and made some elephant shish kebab that I cooked over a fire and dined on while the safari company staff did the hard work of skinning the elephant and loading slabs of meat onto the wagon. Elephant is a coarse meat, but the shish kebab was excellent even in the hot Zimbabwe sun.

Also on this hunt, we ran across an ancient and debilitated cow elephant. She was no longer with a herd, being in such poor health that she could not possibly keep up with them. Instead, she stayed in a patch of brush near a river. She was blind in one eye, very gaunt, and close to death. In a situation like that, a decision must be made whether to allow the animal to suffer and die on its own, to be eaten by scavengers, or whether to shoot the animal and recover it as food for the locals. After receiving approval to shoot the elephant, we moved in close in the jesse and I shot her with the .505, again with a frontal brain shot.

The load that I used in the .505 Gibbs for all elephant shot this trip was 140.0 grains of H4831 powder behind a 600 grain Woodleigh FMJ bullet with a muzzle velocity of 2250 fps. In the Ryan Breeding rifle, that load generated 99 ft. pounds of recoil, compared to 16 ft. pounds of recoil for a standard 30-06. Nonetheless, the .505 Gibbs was relatively easy to control because the stock was designed with very little drop to minimize muzzle rise, and the butt is wide to spread recoil out over a large area. Due to the very slick action on this rifle, chambering a second round was as fast as I have ever experienced with any bolt action rifle. Nonetheless, I found that 10 to 15 shots per day was all that I cared to shoot as I lost concentration beyond that number. I recovered three of the Woodleigh 600 grain FMJ bullets from the dead elephant. They penetrated 53 to 55 inches after passing completely through the skull on frontal brain shots. Performance of rifle and ammo was excellent.

The load I used was one of the lighter ones that Ryan uses in his rifle and was more than enough power for the task at hand. Some of the loads that the rifle liked are as follows:



*Matriarch cow elephant at 12 yards just after a frontal brain shot. Note the dust kicked up from her forehead by the bullet.*



*Matriarch cow elephant dropping as the rifle recoils.*



*Spent case being ejected after shooting matriarch cow elephant.*

Bullet Weight	Powder	Charge	Velocity
525 grains	H4831	135.0	2400 fps
600 grains	H4831	140.0	2250 fps
600 grains	IMR4350	136.0	2250 fps
600 grains	IMR4350	140.0	2500 fps

For anyone interested in big bore rifles, the .505 Gibbs is a fantastic calibre with more power than most shooters can tolerate on a regular basis. And for a top end custom big bore rifle that is beautiful to look at, 100% reliable and a joy to use, I cannot recommend rifle maker Ryan Breeding highly enough.

Peter Wood did a fantastic job of finding and stalking elephants on this safari, as he always does. Sadly 2007 will be Peter's last year as a professional hunter, after which he will move to Montana to pursue a new way of life.

Roger Whittall has a reputation for providing top quality African safaris, and that reputation is very much deserved. Each of my safaris with his company have been in top quality game areas and have been successful in every way. I very much look forward to more safaris with Roger in the future.

Ryan Cox of Zimbabwe took the photos used for this article. Many thanks to Roger Whittall, Ryan Breeding, Peter Wood and Ryan Cox for making this a fantastic hunt. 🐾



*.505 Gibbs rifle on Granite Mountain Arms magnum Mauser action, built by Ryan Breeding ([www.rbbigbores.com](http://www.rbbigbores.com)) and used for this elephant hunt.*



*The hard work of butchering elephant begins.*