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Laughter at High Altitude

Encounter with a pair of elands

Daniel Hudon



WHEN I REACHED THE TOP OF THE GULLY AND SAW WHAT LAY AHEAD, I burst out laughing. I had made a series of miscues to begin the day—I started too late to complete the twelve-mile hike before nightfall, got conflicting advice, bought an expensive map that I never used, thought about turning back twice for an easier hike and even turned off the trail once while thinking about a guide’s recommendation. Here, finally, was a sign that my half-baked plans were the right ones. I laughed both in surprise and delight.

I was in South Africa’s central Drakensberg mountains, also known as the Great Escarpment, which run for 600 miles along the uplifted edge of the central plateau that much of the country sits on. From afar, the mountains look like a wall of rock that shoots straight up from the grasslands, echoing a continental collision some 200 million years earlier. The range features abundant caves, waterfalls, springs, and many routes to climb the escarpment. One could wander among the trails for days—even weeks—without exhausting the views. I chose the central section of “the Berg” mostly for convenience—it was closer than the northern section, and I thought I might see part of the southern section when I ventured into Lesotho in a few days.

Internet sites recommended Cathedral Peak as among the best of the Berg, promising an elevation gain of 5,000 feet, to the peak at 9,858 feet. So my hopeful idea was simply to hike as far up as I could—if it was so good there had to be good views along the way—and then turn around to make it home before dark. In late May, approaching winter in the Southern Hemisphere, daytime temperatures were pleasantly in the low 70s, and there were no crowds, but one drawback of traveling at this time of year was the short days. Sunset was around 5 P.M., and factoring an hour drive to return to my lodging, I had to complete the hike by 4 P.M. At breakfast, some French tourists told me they thought I could do the hike, but on my way out, the hostess recommended Rainbow Gorge as an easier, shorter hike. I weighed the options as I drove to the trailhead at the Cathedral Peak Hotel. There, in front of a three-dimensional scale model of the mountains, a guide recommended that I forgo Cathedral Peak entirely and instead hike up to Baboon Rock, further down the escarpment from Cathedral Peak, which would give me a view of the series of corrugated valleys that led up to the mountains. Though he persuaded me at the time, I had a lingering feeling I’d get a similar view from Cathedral Peak. I bought a map at the shop and set off.

The elands seem to be wondering, without too much worry, what the human is doing up there. LISA BALLARD

As I began the hike, I wondered if my plan was a little too hopeful and the other options gnawed at me. If I aborted now and hiked Rainbow Gorge instead, I'd have to re-park the car another three miles up the road. Decisions, decisions. I crossed a river and was soon at the junction for Baboon Rock. Even though I only had a few words from the hotel guide to go on, I took it and veered off to the right. But somehow it didn't feel right, as if I was copping out. Cathedral Peak was one of the reasons I wanted to explore the central Berg, and it had been on my mind since I checked into my room two nights earlier. Ten minutes later I decided my initial plan was adequate, and I turned back to the junction to finish what I started. Half-baked, hopeful, or just plain silly, I was finally committed to a plan.

The path zigzagged up to an imposing sandstone cliff and skirted around the bottom of it. The sky was sunny and clear, and I got into the rhythm of the trail as it climbed the parched side of a gully before dropping into the lush, shaded side. After a few switchbacks through the bushes, I found a spring at the top.

I climbed over the ridge and couldn't believe my eyes. I was welcomed by a grassy wonderland that made me think I could have been in the steppes of Mongolia or even in the foothills of the prairies of my home province of Alberta, Canada. The familiarity struck me, and I had to catch my breath, I was so delighted. I took a few more steps, and this is when I burst out laughing. Not only did Cathedral Peak and its neighboring peaks, like the Bell Tower, loom in the rock wall beyond the chest-high grasses, two elands were staring at me as if I were an alien.

I WAS THINKING ABOUT HOW LUCKY I WAS TO BE ALONE AND HAVE ALL THIS TO myself, and wondering if there might be any antelope up here. Here was my answer, in the flesh, as if on cue, barely more than a stone's throw away. It was a terrific coincidence made all the more comical by the deadpan expressions on their long faces. I imagined the thought bubbles above their heads: Eland 1: *What is that?* Eland 2: *What does it want?* Eland 1: *Will it just go away or will it make us move first?* Eland 2: *Dunno. Let's keep an eye on it.* And they kept staring as if they wanted in on the joke. If only they knew how much I wanted to share it with them. "No," I wanted to shout, "I'm harmless . . . See? I'm just slipping through this lovely tall grass!" They were nonplussed, exuding a stoic calm that came from knowing they could bolt over the ridge in a flash. I passed through the grass and felt I'd passed an entrance exam because though they stared intently at me, they never moved.

Common elands can be found eating grass and leaves in both savannahs and mountainous regions all over southern Africa, but until now I had only seen them in reserves. Their name is Dutch for “elk” or “moose,” and they are roughly the same size as those animals but with spiral horns that can grow longer than two feet. The eland population is generally considered stable at about 136,000 but is losing habitat to expanding human settlements. Not surprisingly, their docile nature (and superior meat) makes them an easy poaching target. One can also see elands on the abundant and historic San rock paintings in the area where they are often shown in great detail. Though they are the slowest antelope, with maximum bursts of speed to 25 MPH, less than half of the top speed of gazelles and impalas, elands can maintain a more casual trot of 14 MPH indefinitely. With their air of mild disinterest, the two in front of me looked like trotting anywhere was the last thing on their mind.

The laughter encouraged me. I was in the second week of my solo road trip—I drove alone, ate alone, hiked alone (something I never do at home in Boston)—and though there were times when I would have liked some company, I took earnestly to my task of seeing what the country had to offer. The laughter gave me an explicit reminder that I was having an adventure, that truly, I was enjoying my own company and having a good time.

The ridge welled up into a big toe that jutted away from the rock face, and when I climbed atop it, I got the views I was expecting. It was like seeing half of the Grand Canyon with steep, rumpled valleys on either side of me and wrinkled peaks as far as I could see. I looked down on the grassy section of the ridge and the eland were still there, like toy models situated in the quiet landscape. I couldn't believe I had the entire view to myself.

I ate my lunch on a grassy knoll at the tip of the “big toe” and marveled at the view. It was so open and rambling that I was tempted to simply recline where I was until it was time to return to the car. But I pressed on up the ridge and was not disappointed.

Soon, the ridge narrowed so that it was like walking along a knife edge as steep slopes fell away on both sides. With the incline, I quickly gained altitude, and my mind veered between wondering where I should turn around and how far could I go. Closer to the rock face, the path dipped into a lush gully before ascending to a notch called Orange Peel Gap; though it was a steep climb, I quickened my steps. It seemed to be a place that let the clouds pass through, where the vegetation could flourish in the shade. Up at the gap, ridges and valleys rolled away from the rock face as far as I could see, like waves on the ocean.

I lingered at the gap, still tempted to push on further and squeeze more out of the views, but I decided to stick to my rule about not driving after dark and reluctantly chose that as my turnaround. On both the ascent and descent, I was struck by the quiet, as if the whole landscape was sleeping, and it was remarkable that the loudest sound I heard, apart from a few bird calls or salamanders that swished off the trail into the grass, was my own laughter. The elands were still there on my way back, but they had migrated farther up the slope, perhaps now deciding that whatever I was, they didn't want to be too close to me. I didn't laugh this second time, but I still loved them for their taciturn, straight-faced company.

DANIEL HUDON is a writer and lecturer in Boston. His most recent book is *Brief Eulogies for Lost Animals: An Extinction Reader* (Pen & Anvil Press, 2017). Visit him at danielhudon.com.

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