

Big John Goes Camo

Most hunters of my acquaintance dress 'properly' when they head out with a rifle slung over the shoulder and by a hunter's definition, 'properly dressed' means wearing either khaki or camo. Although some conservative hunters stick to traditional khaki, camo is becoming more popular especially because of the growth of bow hunting. I am a little surprised therefore that few local companies have taken the opportunity to manufacture camouflage hunting apparel. One that has is Big John Clothing company that has its factory and retail outlet in Howick in KwaZulu-Natal.

Founded in 1993 by husband and wife team, Ian and Ann Johnson, Big John started manufacturing rugged outdoor clothing that was snapped up by KZN farmers, hunters and outdoor enthusiasts. Right from the start the Johnsons made a point of listening to their customers and the feedback they got enabled them to make the type and size clothing that satisfied their clients' requests, such as embroidered and/or silk screened items for companies, clubs and organizations. Ann Johnson told me they can just about duplicate any symbol or logo a customer wants.

Big John took the 'camo plunge' in 2006 when they obtained permission to 'customize' a 3-D design belonging to Cabelas in the USA. With the Cabelas 'hardwood green' pattern as the base, a designer made the changes necessary to keep things legal and soon Big John 3D camo was rolling off



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the production line. The pattern or design is typical American, depicting their hardwood forests with oak-type leaves and trees – no acacias, mopane or ghwarrie bush here.

Although some prefer camouflage that depicts local vegetation, the most important aspect of any pattern is that it blends with natural bush in a variety of veld types. Big John camo does that very well, the pictures show that it is a perfect compromise which works in many South African veld types. I have been using Big John products

since August 2006 – in KwaZulu-Natal, the Free State and Northern Cape with total satisfaction. This pattern has green-brown (rather than the more usual grey-brown) look to it, which makes it ideal for the green seasons – late summer/autumn and spring. However, it also has enough dark 'tree bark' to make it suitable for mid-winter use in the bushveld and mountainous areas like the Moordenaarskaroo, where it blends in with the dark, rocky backgrounds and the dark greens of the ghwarrie bushes.

Left: Here the hunter demonstrates how well the camo blends with the bush in northern KwaZulu-Natal.

Right: The hunter makes himself more visible for the benefit of the camera.





Left: Can you spot the shirt – it blends perfectly with a *jakkalsbessie* bush in the Free State. Right: When used properly the Big John design can be very effective in fairly open terrain.

Whilst hunting in the southern Free State recently, I had an interesting and entertaining morning stalking six black wildebeest bulls. They suddenly stopped and, after milling around for a time, headed straight back towards me. (I was wearing my Big Johns.) I scrambled to a big *taaibos* and hugging the trunk, waited on the shady side of it. The animals eventually walked past me at about 50m and I stopped them in their tracks by imitating that long, drawn out snort they utter when alarmed. After a few seconds they all advanced, looking for the 'animal' that was responsible for making the noise. Eventually they were less than 30m from me, curious but not at all alarmed. I was motionless in the shade, right next to the trunk but with no branches in front of me to break up my shape. Failing to identify me positively, they eventually lost interest and walked off in single file.

In Natal I have successfully stalked blesbuck, blue wildebeest, warthog, kudu and impala while wearing Big John clothing. Just remember that you cannot stand in bright sunlight next to a tree with rifle in hand and then expect animals to simply ignore you. Camouflage will only work if you use it to blend in with the natural vegetation and, even when you do that correctly, the wind could give you away.

Big John makes short and long sleeved shirts and long trousers as well as jackets, waistcoats and overalls. For bow hunters (and perhaps even bird watchers) hoods/face masks with draw-strings and face masks that attach to peak caps are also available. Big John also manufactures small, floppy and wide rimmed hats as well as standard peak caps. Shirts retail for R175 and R195 respectively, the trousers for R240 and the

jackets from R495 to R550.

Shirts come with two chest pockets while trousers are cut in army or combat style, with additional large side pockets and double lining in the knee areas. The overalls are gems, they have two large chest pockets, a small pocket on the left arm as well as two standard and two 'combat trouser-type' side pockets. The chest and arm pockets use zips while the side leg pockets have big buttons. At the front the overalls close and open by means of a zip – there are in fact two which allow you to 'go to the bathroom' without having to take the overall off. The legs also have inserts at the bottom that you can unzip to allow for putting on or taking off the overalls without having to take off your shoes first. Overalls are comfortable to wear and I know a number of hunters who prefer them to an ordinary shirt and trousers. They sell for R295.

Big John's fleece-lined hunting jacket is warm enough for some serious winter weather but is not bulky. All those who hunt on foot know that bulky jackets are a serious nuisance to store during the hotter hours of the day – they take up a lot of space.

The Big John company is known for its durable khaki clothing and the camos are no exception. Made from heavy-duty, pre-shrunk cotton this clothing will withstand a lot of hard use, but that heavy cotton makes it too hot for comfort in summer. Fortunately most hunting is done during the colder months when that extra warmth is most welcome. However, I look forward to the day when Big John (and other manufacturers) start producing summer-weight camo.

Another problem with heavy-duty cotton is that it can be uncomfortably hard or stiff. When I tried Big John's prototypes



How not to use camo. The hunter's body is well camouflaged, but notice how the face and hat stand out against the sky.

I found the shirts uncomfortable and very abrasive at the armpits and nipples. I reported this and the Johnsons now put all their camo through a special washing process that softens up the material. The shirts and overalls I received early in 2007 are comfortable to wear and give you that real 'old friend' feeling when you put them on. Full marks to Ian and Ann for listening to and acting on a customer's complaints. I was also not too happy with the size of the belt loops on the trousers and that has been changed too. The buttons on the shirts are still a bit too small for my liking, but I must immediately point out that that is just personal preference and that the size of the buttons does not detract from the quality of the shirts.

I am impressed with this Big John clothing and can happily recommend it for hunting – the 3D design is suitable for a variety of terrains and the quality of the garments is beyond question. For more information on Big John's khaki or camo products contact the company on 033-330-7374 or email them at <sales@bigjohn.co.za>. 