

Reconsidering THE ROAN

by Fiona Zerbst

The roan (*Hippotragus equinus*) bull, 'Chari'. "Born and bred on Schoongezicht, this bull has an amazing body, thick neck and beautiful colour. He measures an impressive 30" at 4.5 years," says George Potgieter. "Here, it's possible to see why the roan is the second-largest antelope in Africa."





Breeding roan (*Hippotragus equinus*) is not the uphill battle it is purported to be, says George Potgieter, owner of Schoongezicht, Limpopo, who specialises in rare-game breeding. *Wildlife Ranching* spoke to him about the future of this charismatic species.



George Potgieter
at Schoongezicht.

“Not less from its singular beauty, than from its extreme rarity, there were few game animals in the whole African catalogue that I more eagerly sought for than the roan antelope – my hankering after its gay spoils being moreover greatly increased by the difficulties that I at first experienced in obtaining possession of them,” wrote Captain W. Cornwallis Harris in his 1840 hunting primer *Portraits of the Game and Wild Animals of Southern Africa*. “Equal in stature to the largest Arab horse, the whole structure – remarkably powerful and muscular – is especially adapted for traversing the rugged regions that it frequents.”



▲ Major Sir William Cornwallis Harris (baptised 2 April 1807 – died 9 October 1848) was an English military engineer, artist and hunter.

Although Harris and his fellow hunters had one ambition – to hunt as many animals as they possibly could in the region – there is little doubt that he genuinely appreciated the beauty of the “sturdy rose-coloured buck” that has come to be classified as ‘rare game’. The quagga and the blue buck did not survive the hunting excesses of the 18th century – but the roan, like the bontebok, was brought back from the brink of extinction (there were only about 300 roan left in South Africa at one stage). Between 1968 and 1972, the former Transvaal Provincial Administration decided to protect the surviving free-roaming roan by housing them in the Percy Fyfe Nature Reserve and allowing a handful of private game farmers to manage them.

“If it wasn’t for game farmers, there wouldn’t have been that many roan left,” says George Potgieter, who currently has approximately 350 roan at Schoongezicht (more than the total number of roan in all protected national areas). “We even bought some roan from Percy Fyfe and they were in a terrible condition – they were not very healthy, and a lot of interbreeding had taken place.” Game farmers played an important role in the survival of the species and today we can proudly say that they are essentially out of danger.



▲ The well-known roan cow, 'Liewe Heksie', which measures an impressive 29½".

Nevertheless, the roan is considered a vulnerable species, and a peculiarly sensitive one. For this reason, some game farmers – especially new industry entrants – shy away from breeding this species. George believes that there are compelling reasons for game farmers to reconsider – not least because it is crucial to get their numbers up.

1 "There is a misperception that roan die very easily, especially in bushveld areas. However, Schoongezicht has been very successful in introducing roan to the bushveld and if you look at the early distribution of roan you will see that they were more widely distributed throughout southern Africa than

sable" says George. He says animals do sometimes struggle to adapt if they are moved too far, but nowadays it is relatively easy to find roan that are already adapted to the bushveld.

2 Increased biosecurity on farms has gone a long way towards improving the roan survival rate in recent years. "If you can control ticks, you can be successful with roan," says George. "I believe the roan population decreased due to tick-borne diseases, especially theileriosis, but nowadays we manage these diseases a lot better and increased biodiversity has seen an increase in the number of oxpeckers, which love ticks." He also believes that the vets have started to understand roan much better and theileriosis is being treated more effectively these days.



▲ A roan heifer that was sold last year at the Bloodline Africa auction. This year, Schoongezicht will once again present roan at the auction on 9 June 2018.



▲ Working on some roan with the late Dr Louis van Deventer (a vet who initially played a big role in Schoongezicht's success with roan in the bushveld – sadly, he passed away in 2015).

3 They take to supplement feed very easily, which is why they can adapt so well in various areas.

4 There is a perception that if you breed roan in camp systems they cannot be reintroduced into the wild. But according to George, this is not entirely accurate. "Even Kruger National Park moved their roan into a breeding enclosure due to their low numbers," he says. [KNP protected some of their animals in a 300ha enclosure – they had 450 roan in 1986 but the population has dwindled to not more than 100 animals.] "It was necessary to protect them at one stage. However, we are moving away from small camps ourselves. We have moved all our bulls into big, open areas with

no tick or internal parasite control and they are doing tremendously well. Yes, we treat them if we need to, and yes, they do get a bit of supplementary feed in winter, like our kudus, but they are holding their own in leopard and cheetah areas. In fact, we have noticed that bulls on 1 000ha are doing much better than in 50ha monitoring camps." George says when it comes to camps bigger is definitely better – and roan do not take well to bomas. "Never put them into small bomas. They hate that, and it kills them," he says. "They may look more relaxed than sable, but as soon as you put them into a boma they stress." He also suggested a camp rotation system if possible to control internal parasites.



▲ The roan cow, 'Alida'. "She was born and bred on Schoongezicht and has the perfect colour, horn shape and body," says George.

If you look at the early distribution of roan you will see that they were more widely distributed throughout southern Africa than sable.



A roan cow in pure bushveld.

A calf being tagged.



▲ Roan calves are hidden by their mother for the first two weeks, after which time they form 'toddler groups'. "During the year, a heifer will look after the toddlers most of the time, while the mothers graze around with the rest of the herd," says George.

George says what made him "fall in love" with roan is the fact that they have a lot of personality.

5 Roan are extremely fertile if in good condition. "Because they are so fertile, roan breed throughout the year," says George. "We used to have cows calving at ten months to 12 every year, but we have discovered that this is not good for them, or for the calves. If you want to monitor your animals, put them into calving seasons and try to take

the bulls out at certain times of the year. The best time for a calf to fall is around February or March, when the mother is in peak condition. In 2011, we started off with 22 calves – now we average around 100 calves a year. In the beginning, we had a 67% survival rate with a 12.4-month calf interval, which has now gone up to 92%. We are down to an 11.2-month calf interval. We are starting to stretch the inter-calving intervals again and I believe one of the biggest mistakes we as game farmers make is to let heifers be covered too early. I would recommend that they be covered not before 22-24 months, which helps the heifer with her first calf."

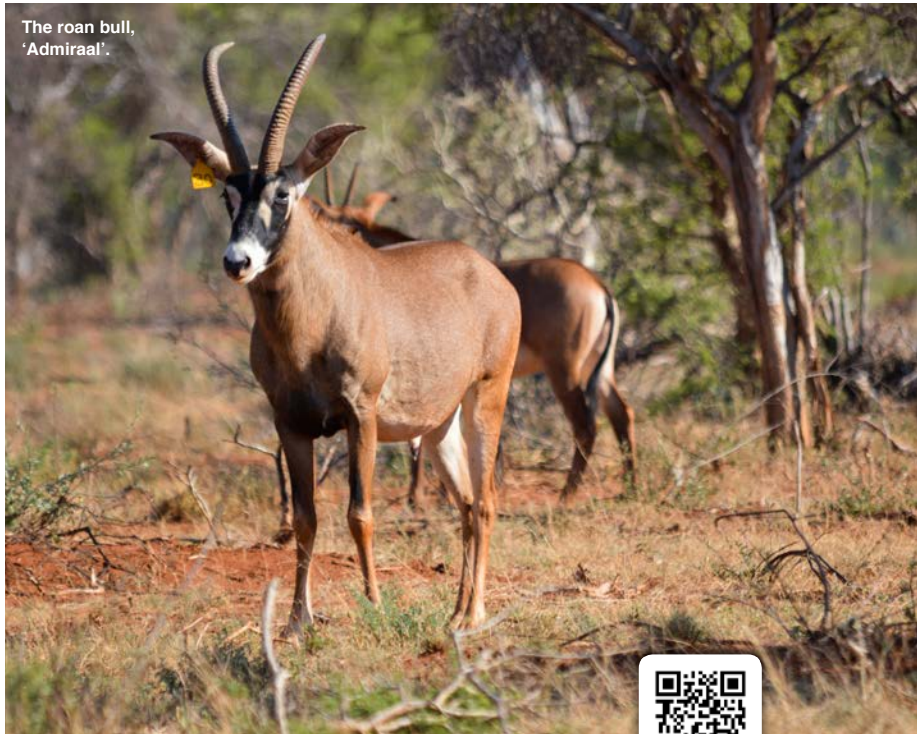
6 George says what made him "fall in love" with roan is the fact



Facts about roan

- There is a moratorium on hybrid or Western roan populations – the only species permitted are the indigenous Southern Roan antelope *Hippotragus equinus equinus* and *Hippotragus equinus cottoni*.
- A basic habitat assessment must be conducted on your property to ensure that the habitat is suitable for roan. You do not need to conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment.
- If you or a client would like to hunt roan, you must be in possession of a TOPS Hunting Permit. The permit must be in the name of a specific client and you need to provide that person's name, full physical address, the name of the farm where the hunt will take place, and the period when the hunting activity will take place (which is usually valid for one month). "The rationale is that roan require an elevated degree of protection due to their TOPS status," says Stephen Palos, CEO of The National Confederation of Hunters Associations in South Africa (CHASA). "However, it is actually more difficult for game farmers to move them than it is to hunt them!"
- Before moving roan, one must have a DNA profile of each animal to ensure they have not been interbred with Western roan, which is a completely different species (like the bontebok and blesbok).

that they have a lot of personality. "If you have been working late, and you arrive late at the camp, or in the early morning, they are happy to see you – they trot around," says George. "They have extremely nice personalities. They are not as aggressive with one another as some other species and the bull and cow are very much alike, unlike sable, where there is a huge difference and the bull carries all the glamour. An entire herd of roan is a beautiful sight." He also loves the calves. "I think they are the most spectacular animal God has created," he says. "They have wonderful big, donkey-like ears. Bushveld roan don't get frostbite on their ears, which is a really good thing – some roan in colder parts of the country can lose the tips of their ears!"



The roan bull, 'Admiraal'.



For more information, visit www.raregamebreeding.com