

# Reaping rands from roans



Just south of the Gariep Dam in the mighty Orange River near Venterstad, you will find the Gariep Eco Reserve, owned by the Partnership Kruger, Cloete and Donian. The logo at the entrance to the reserve depicts two superb roan bulls, and it was from roan antelope that this venture grew from strength to strength.

Garry Donian started farming mainly with Merinos on this 4 000 hectare property in 1989, but it was a good decade later that he became interested in also ranching with scarce and expensive game species. He commissioned Prof J du P Bothma and Ben Orban, from the University of Pretoria's Centre for Wildlife Management to do an ecological study of his property, and the results indicated a habitat that would suit roan antelope, amongst other grazing species such as sable, eland, buffalo, etc.

At that stage, as far as Garry could determine, no-one in the Eastern Cape was involved with the breeding of roan antelope, causing him to look elsewhere for expertise on this species.

It took some guts to become the Eastern Cape pioneer on breeding with roan, especially since this species would require considerably more active management than most of the other scarce species. Roans, for instance, calve any time of the year, not like some of the other species all

in a relatively short period. With winter minimum temperatures in that region often dropping to minus 10 °C, it was crucial to minimise potential calf losses due to low temperature-related diseases, such as pneumonia, or even losing adult animals taking strain from frost bite or hypothermia. Furthermore, Garry made a commitment to himself that he **would not** ranch intensively with game in small paddocks. His game would be holistically ranched, extensively in big (400 ha+) camps where he applied rotational grazing, or not at all.

After an extended period of research he eventually, in 2001, invested R1 million in two male and five female roans. He bought them from a breeder near Kimberley, mainly because of the excellent bloodlines, but also because the animals were acclimatised to sub-zero temperatures. The breeder's original stock was selected from superb Malawi (thus southern roan) strains before importation.

The cows were all pregnant, and the

first calves were born in 2002.

One of the two bulls bought (named Merlin) became the initial breeding bull. Amongst many other offspring, Merlin sired a beautiful bull named Majestic, who later took over the stud work. In 2005, Garry sold a small breeding herd, amongst which was Merlin, at the Rooikraal (now Buffalo Game Ranch) auctioneering pens near Bloemfontein. A few years later the buyer informed Garry that he had had Merlin hunted by an overseas client and that the horns had been officially measured at a touch over 34 inches, which beat the minimum entry level for Rowland Ward (27") by a huge 7 inches. At that stage, Garry knew he had excellent quality animals, although horn length did not count that much in his book, and he was pleasantly sur-



*When Garry calls, all the animals within hearing distance approach him for some treats. Seen here below are roan, some buffalo and Livingstone's eland.*



prised.

In the meanwhile, Merlin's son, Majestic, at the age of seven years, had horns measuring 34¼ inches and an SCI (Safari Club International) score of 89, and was sold for a record price. One of his offspring, Masseur, is currently 2,5 years old, and measures 26 inches, measuring 32 inches at five years, indicating the prominent horn length. One of Merlin's sons was hunted by an American bowhunter (outfitted by Southern Cross Safaris) and it scored 74 inches in SCI. As the new **Number One** in SCI, it broke the previous record of 67 by 7 inches, and that at the age of three years! Grandfather, son and grandson would thus all three have featured in the Top Eight of Rowland Ward, and better bulls had last been hunted only prior to 1945!

Obviously, Merlin had inherited excellent genes. To date, 12 bulls (some only three years old) have been hunted and all of those qualified for Rowland Ward! This is even more remarkable considering the fact that Garry absolutely refuses to feed his animals any horn growth-stimulating pellets or food additives.

Presently, Arthur II (the son of Arthur I – the other original bull brought from Kimberley), measuring 32 inches at five years, is breeding with Merlin's progeny, and the young bulls are showing excellent promise.

For Garry, line-breeding with proven genetics is essential for success. A good temperament is also extremely important in his selection criteria. He has to date sold 44 animals (besides the initial parcel sold at Rooikraal, the rest was all sold out-of-hand), and has had 12 hunted. His calving percentage is 100%, at a calving interval of 11 months.

His gross return on the investment over 10 years has been 39% per annum. Allowing for direct costs, the return was still an attractive 38% per annum.

After his initial investment in roan, he has sold roan (live and hunted) to the value of R5,4 million, and still has a few million rands worth of roan on his property. Stock farming – no matter what kind – will not easily beat this return on investment!

During the past decade, Garry has reinvested his profits from the roans in buffalo, Matetsi and Zambian sable, Livingstone's eland and tsessebe, all of which are doing extremely well on Gariep Eco Reserve.

During my visit with Garry it became clear that he had an absolute passion for all his animals, not only for his expensive game animals. His game animals, which run in extensive camps where rotational grazing on a holistic basis is practised, have by patience and endurance been tamed in such a

way that they (when lured by specially mixed game pellets) fearlessly approach him and visitors accompanying him to within touching distance, from distances of five hundred metres or more away. Illustrating his passion for his animals – while driving back through his herd of Nguni and Boran cattle (he farms only with indigenous stock) he even congratulated a cow that had just calved! His Damara sheep flock, which never undergoes any dipping, medication or other treatment, is also his pride and joy.

There's much to be learned from a passionate man like Garry, and he's not shy to share his expertise and hard-gained knowledge with anyone interested in any of the species on the farm. However, it was the roan which started it all.

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