

The population of roan antelopes has been in dramatic decline, but two projects in South Africa's little-known Waterberg Biosphere aim to bring the species back from the brink.

A photograph of three roan antelopes in a savanna landscape. The antelopes are brown with white faces and black markings around their eyes. They have long, spiraling horns. The background is a lush green field with scattered trees and a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. One antelope is in the foreground, looking directly at the camera. Two others are behind it, one to the left and one to the right, also looking towards the camera.

The **RIDDLE** *of the* **ROAN**

Blighted by clumsy conservation attempts, habitat loss and disease, could there now be signs of hope for Africa's second largest antelopes?

Story & photos Mark Eveleigh

“Roan antelope are the most enigmatic of large antelopes and remain relatively misunderstood.” It’s the end of a long summer and Leanne Huber is gazing across the grasslands that are home to 40 roan antelope. She’s been working with these animals for more than a decade and has come to know them well.

“Because their babies are quite easily taken by predators they have a reputation of being bad parents, but it’s not true at all. When they’re defending their young they can seem intimidatingly huge!”

Leanne and her husband, wildlife veterinarian Dr Paul Huber, run the roan breeding programme at Ant’s Hill on South Africa’s Waterberg plateau.

“We also breed sable, eland and gemsbok here,” she continues, “but the roan are my favourites. They’re particularly protective during the weeks when their young are hidden in the long grass. If we even walk

close to a hiding place the dominant cow will come racing over.”

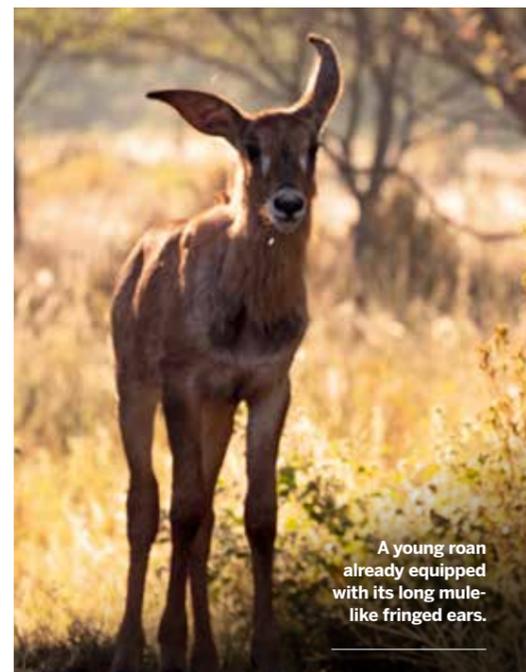
Roan are the second biggest antelope (after the eland) and their barrel-chested, horse-like build does indeed give them a powerful appearance. Named for their reddish colour, roan are sometimes mistaken for the darker sable. Their Afrikaans name *bastergemsbok* (‘bastard gemsbok’) relates to the distinctive gemsbok-like black-and-white facial markings, but their distinctive fringed ears give them a comically startled appearance. Even these unique appendages remain an evolutionary mystery, though it is possible that they might provide protection in the Highveld habitat, where winter temperatures can plummet below freezing. “Roan are certainly prone to frostbite,” says Huber, “and when it gets really cold they can lose the tips of their ears.”

As he manoeuvres his Range Rover game vehicle through a breeding compound where two-week-old roan calves suckle from their mothers, he continues: “In most

Roan are misrepresented as gentle giants, but even lions think twice about attacking fully grown adults.



Part of the Ant’s Hill roan breeding programme on South Africa’s Waterberg plateau. Roan mothers are fiercely protective of their young.



A young roan already equipped with its long mule-like fringed ears.

of Africa the roan population has suffered from predation, habitat loss and disease. They’re particularly susceptible to theileria – a tick-borne disease that affects them almost as malaria affects humans. Sometimes the mother transmits the disease through the placenta so that the young are born with it.”

Wild roan populations suffer heavily from predation and numbers frequently plummet even in areas where zebra and wildebeest flourish by comparison. For this reason, they’re sometimes considered to be relatively helpless – a sort of gentle giant. But this is far from the truth. As biologist Wendell Swank wrote in his 1971 book *African Antelope*: “It is said by people who have spent a lifetime in the bush that even the lion will not attack a full-grown roan.”

Tricky to track

This thought was at the front of my mind earlier that morning when I left my cottage at Ant’s Hill to set out on horseback in search of the free-range roan that had been

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released from the breeding compounds. Ant’s Hill is one of the few places in Africa where you can ride among roan, as these animals – like all the reserve’s wildlife, including white rhinos and giraffes – are accustomed to grazing alongside horses.

Within less than an hour, ace guide Sekhwiri Langa had managed to track down a bachelor herd in the midst of a dense acacia thicket. As we approached almost within touching distance I realised that, even from horseback, these antelopes seemed intimidatingly big, their horns

sharp and sturdy. Though roan were traditionally hunted for meat, they were never particularly targeted by trophy hunters: with the longest recorded horns measuring 128cm, they are unspectacular next to those of the sable (165cm) and greater kudu (188cm).

This bachelor herd was made up of about 10 fairly young males, still far from being statuesque dominant bulls, yet their powerful build lent them a noble appearance.

“At around two years of age, roan bulls are driven from the herd by the dominant bull,” Sekhwiri whispered. “They spend the next three or four years in bachelor herds until they have the strength to attempt to take over a herd for themselves.”

A little further down the track we came across a lone female that was clearly not in such fine fettle. “Animals can be inhumane,” Sekhwiri pointed out ironically. “Weak animals struggle to keep up with the herd or are driven away because they invite the attention of predators.” ▶

South Africa's large antelopes



ELAND

The common eland (shoulder height 1.7m, max weight 900kg) is widely considered to be Africa's biggest antelope, but the giant eland – found in sporadic groups from Senegal to northern Uganda – is slightly larger, measuring 1.8m at the shoulder and weighing up to 907kg. For such a huge beast the eland is typically surprisingly timid.



GREATER KUDU

A kudu bull with twisting horns rising to almost 188cm is surely one of Africa's most majestic ungulates. These talented escape artists are capable of clearing a 2m fence from a standing jump. Addo Elephant National Park (South Africa) – with an estimated population of around 2,000 – is arguably the best place on the planet to see kudu.



TSESSEBE

The southern African tsessebe (shoulder height 1.2m, max weight 160kg) is known as the topi in East Africa. It occurs under various names (with several subspecies from West Africa southwards) and is the world's fastest antelope, able to reach up to 83km/hr. Breeding herds are often sighted from a distance because of the territorial males' habit of posing on top of termite mounds.



SABLE

The sable (shoulder height 1.35m, max weight 270kg) is named for the intense black of the male's coat. Females and young are tan or chestnut and all have white underbellies. The sable's backward-arching horns are perhaps the most spectacular in the animal kingdom with one bull's (from the giant sable subspecies in Angola) reaching a record-breaking 164.7cm.



NYALA

Distributed southwards of Malawi, nyala (shoulder height 1.2m, max weight 108kg) are colourful in more ways than one, having evolved to the stage that the nyala ram is the dandy of the antelope tribe. Their stiff-legged ritualistic battles – more a dance than a territorial fight – are one of Africa's strangest sights.

It was unusual that this young female should be so skinny after what had been the best rains in 60 years. As Huber had pointed out, roan are susceptible to disease, and this specimen was fortunate to be on a reserve where she would be darted and treated.

Shrinking from view

Roan have disappeared from most of their original range, which stretches from South Africa to Burkina Faso and Ethiopia. Even where they are still found in large numbers, they are typically elusive and shy. Many dedicated safari connoisseurs admit to never having encountered one of these spectacular animals in the wild.

"Historically there were probably large numbers of roan in what is now Kruger National Park," Huber tells me as we drive back to his headquarters in an old farmhouse overlooking the breeding compound, "but I've only seen two roan in

the 40 years I've been travelling in Kruger."

I'd looked for roan every time I'd been in Greater Kruger but I'd never even found tracks. In Zimbabwe's immense Hwange National Park, however, I'd seen a bachelor herd of roan mixed with herds of wildebeest, zebra and sable. During an assignment in the Serengeti, rangers told me of the mysterious appearance of a single roan bull travelling in the thick of the southbound wildebeest migration. "Nobody knows where it came from," they said. "We think maybe it was Kenyan and perhaps just got caught up in the excitement of the migration."

Sadly there are now only a dozen individuals left in Kenya (in Ruma National Park). Could it be that this animal escaped that local extinction crisis, to find safety in numbers within the migration?

There are said to be around 60,000 wild roan left in Africa, with large numbers in Burkina Faso, Zambia, Cameroon and

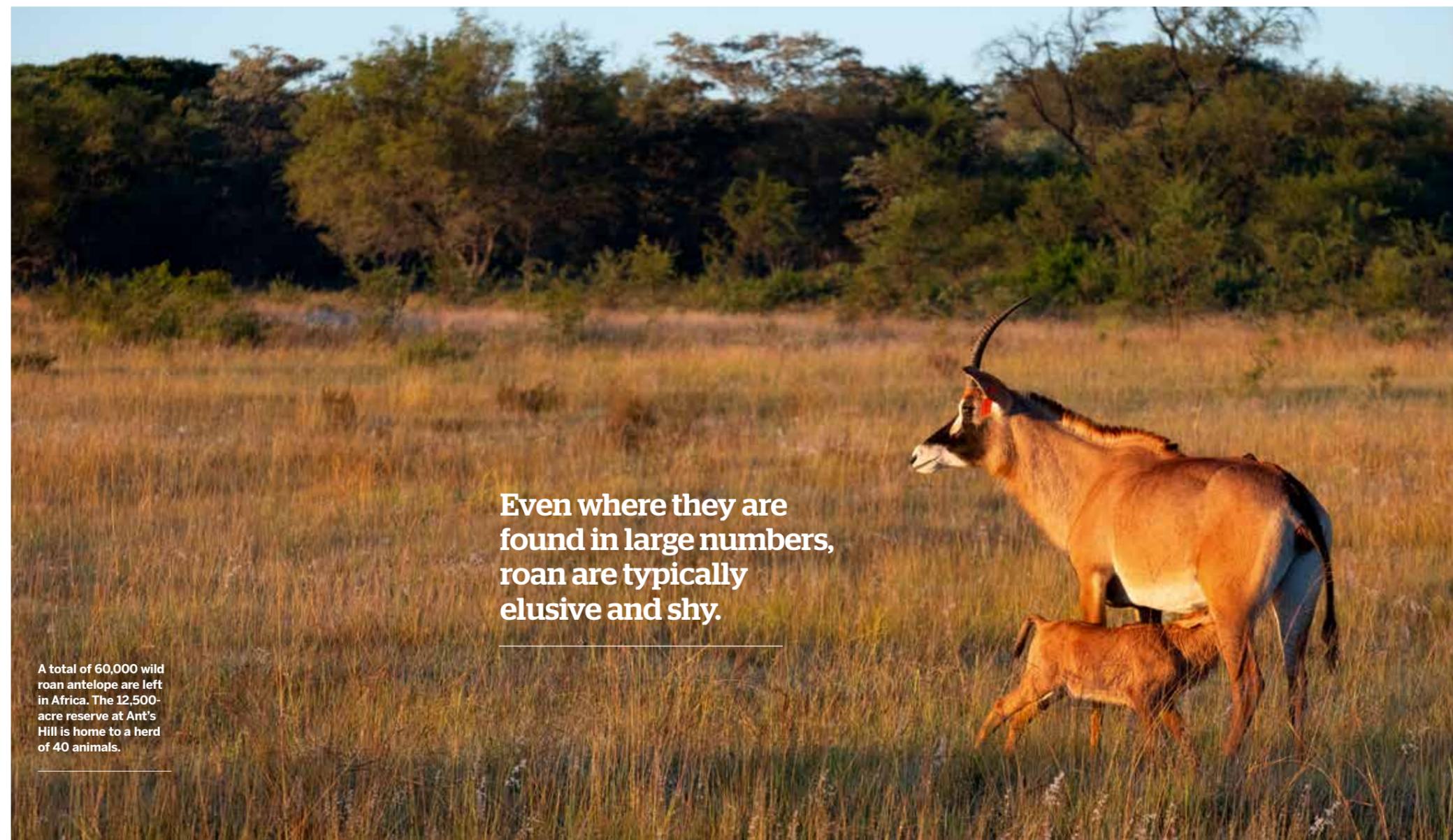
Tanzania. In most parts of their range, however, disease, habitat loss, overgrazing and predation – and sometimes misguided conservation decisions – have played a part in their decline.

Misguided methods

In 1986, Kruger National Park was home to about 450 roan, but in less than two decades the figure dropped to about 25. In *Shaping Kruger* – a must-read for anyone fascinated by African wildlife – Mitch Reardon investigated "the riddle of the disappearing roan". In an effort to boost their numbers, the park's conservation experts had instigated the Water for Game project in the mid-'70s, and 35 man-made waterholes were constructed, along with six dams. It was a disaster as far as the roan were concerned. The water enticed large numbers of zebra, wildebeest and buffalo into the area and predators followed in their

wake. Roan require long grass in which to hide their young, and with the grass cropped short, they were now easy pickings for lions, leopards, hyenas and even opportunistic jackals. It was the first of a run of ecological disasters to beset the park's roan population.

A ranger I met in Kruger (who asked to remain nameless) had worked on a South African National Parks (SANParks) game-capture programme in 2014, in which most of the remaining roan in northern Kruger were rounded up and concentrated in a protective enclosure, prior to being reintroduced to suitably remote habitats. During the relocations, disaster struck when vultures transmitted anthrax from the carcass of an infected elephant into a waterhole in the enclosure, leading to the death of every roan inside. Then, in July 2020, South African journalists reported that a SANParks section ranger was dismissed for gross negligence after almost ►



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A total of 60,000 wild roan antelope are left in Africa. The 12,500-acre reserve at Ant's Hill is home to a herd of 40 animals.



Only around 400 roan remain in the wild in South Africa, so the Waterberg breeding projects provide a crucial foothold for the species.



Roan tend to avoid the company of other prey animals but will graze alongside zebra, wildebeest and horses within the reserve.

a third of the park's remaining roan died of dehydration in a protective breeding boma that had been allowed to run dry.

By most estimates there are probably fewer than 60 roan in Kruger today, and only about 400 surviving in the wild throughout South Africa. Lapalala Wilderness Reserve is home to around 90 – probably the largest single population in South Africa.

Signs of hope

It was a rare privilege therefore to sip gin-and-tonic sundowners at Lapalala Wilderness Reserve one evening while the bush fairly crackled around us with a breeding herd of about 30 healthy roan antelope. For once they actually outnumbered the zebra and wildebeest that also grazed among the acacias. This, a rare success story for roan, was the brainchild of conservation legends Clive Walker and Dale Parker, who established Lapalala Wilderness Reserve in 1981, with the roan as a flagship species.

Clive and his son Anton recently founded the fascinating Waterberg Living Museum, which also has its own small herd of eight habituated roan antelope grazing throughout the grounds. "This is an aggressive

The bush fairly crackled around us with a breeding herd of about 30 healthy roan antelope.

species when fighting or wounded and utters a blowing snort when surprised," Walker wrote in his seminal *Signs of the Wild*. The museum offers an unexpected opportunity to get close to habituated roan on foot.

"When I first visited the area that would become Lapalala Wilderness Reserve, it was one of only three places in the country that had any roan at all," Clive recalled as we sat among his collection of memorabilia from 60 years in conservation. "They were incredibly rare."

Forty years later they're still rare but, thanks to its successful breeding programme, Lapalala is probably the best reserve in all Africa in which to see large numbers of wild roan.

While rock art proves they were historically in the area, Walker believes they were driven here by hunting pressure from white settlers. It was probably not hunting, or even habitat loss that decimated their numbers in this area, however. The sourveld nature of the grass was largely unpalatable for what is apparently a rather finicky species. Also, ranchers brought cattle-dip pesticides that not only attacked ticks but also poisoned the oxpeckers that fed on them.

Once farms began to switch from cattle to game-ranching, they abandoned the use of pesticides and the ticks returned in overwhelming numbers. It was not until oxpeckers were physically reintroduced into Lapalala in 1989 that the roan population had a chance to rebound.

Few could have guessed that part of the solution to the riddle of the roan would be provided by the little red-billed birds that ride on the back of some of the world's rarest large antelopes. An example of symbiosis in its purest form. 🦋



The oxpecker's taste for ticks was crucial for the roan's recovery.



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FIND OUT MORE Ant's Hill Reserve waterberg.net/south-africa-game-reserve; Lapalala Wilderness Reserve lapalala.com

Oxpecker: Alamy