

# Saving the Roan Antelope

By B. L. Penzhorn

Because the numbers of roan antelope have dwindled seriously, a study project has been started in the Kruger National Park. Sixteen animals were captured by drug immobilisation and then released in a special enclosure where they can be studied. The author, who is a member of the Board of Trustees, assesses the status of the roan where it is found in Africa and describes the project.

**T**HE roan antelope *Hippotragus equinus*, second largest species of antelope with a shoulder height of five feet, is in danger of becoming extinct, at least in South Africa. Once spread over the African continent from West Africa and the Sahara southwards to the Transvaal and Natal, excepting the Congo rain forest, roan today are limited to a few areas. In South Africa, there are not more than 350: in the Kruger National Park numbers have dwindled to 285 (Pienaar), whilst not more than 50 remain in the Transvaal outside the park (Kettlitz); in Natal they are extinct. In the settled parts of South West Africa, where they were never numerous, they have been hunted to extinction, though a fair number still inhabit the Caprivi Strip and the adjoining parts of Botswana; in south-eastern Angola they are still fairly numerous, and there are still some in the game reserves of Rhodesia and Zambia; in East Africa numbers have been drastically reduced. In Tanzania a small herd of 16 has been released on Rubondo Island in Lake Victoria, where they will be fully protected.

The roan is a handsome animal with a wiry coat of rufous grey, a strikingly marked black and white face, fairly short stout horns curved backwards, long donkey-like ears tufted at the tips, and an erect mane extending down the back of the neck to the shoulders.

It is well known that animal numbers fluctuate and it may well be that the roan in the Kruger are in a natural decline and that sooner or later their numbers will increase again. But the National Parks Board of Trustees decided that it could not wait to see whether this was the case, and launched a 'Roan Antelope Project'. The first stage of this was the erection of a game-proof enclosure of one square mile (640 acres) at Nwashitsumbe, twenty miles south-east of Punda Milia in the extreme northern part of the Kruger, chosen because it is the focal point of roan distribution in the park. It was impossible from such a large area to drive out all the large animals, and the few that remain are being removed after immobilisation with drugs or otherwise. The enclosure is on a plain in the mopane *Colophospermum mopane* veld on basaltic soil, some parts covered with dense mopane scrub, but in others open park land with marula trees *Sclerocarya caffra*. The main grasses are *Themeda triandra*, *Heteropogon contortus*, *Cenchrus ciliaris*, *Schmidtia bulbosa* and various species of *Panicum* and *Setaria*.

In July 1967 ten roan antelope from various herds were captured by

drug immobilisation (Pienaar), using a crossbow from a Land Rover or a helicopter; most of them were immobilised within 12 minutes and went down in less than 15 minutes after being darted. They were then blind-folded; body measurements were taken, distinctive ear tags affixed and blood samples collected; the tips of the horns were sawn off and replaced with pieces of plastic tubing to prevent injury to handlers and to new arrivals in the enclosure; the dart wounds were treated and each animal received a long-acting penicillin injection. Finally they were given the antidote and transported to the holding boma, in a corner of the enclosure close to the watering point. After a period of rest in the boma, the door was opened and they were given the freedom of the enclosure where they soon settled down. Here the herd will be studied by Mr Salmon Joubert, a graduate in Wildlife Management of the University of Pretoria, who has been making an intensive study of roan antelope in the Kruger. He will pay particular attention to reproduction, population dynamics, habitat selection and feeding preferences and selectivity. A wattle and daub hut has been built near the enclosure for him and his wife, and he spends most of his time observing the herd, and also studying free-ranging animals whenever possible. Two game rangers patrol the fence daily at dawn, noon and dusk and immediately report any irregularity. The study will later be extended to include the congeneric sable antelope *Hippotragus niger*. For the second stage of the project it is planned to introduce roan antelope into the Kruger from other parts of southern Africa.

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## REFERENCES

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## A Short-sighted Killing

*Black Lechwe* quotes this farmer's letter published by the *Times of Zambia*:

'The picture of the Ndola bailiff proudly displaying a ten-foot python he had shot on his farm was interesting but more than a little saddening – and short-sighted on the part of the marksman. Mr Davis may have lost five chickens to the python – but has he ever considered just what the sacrifice might have been worth in terms of crops? Rats and mice eat maize. Pythons . . . eat rats and mice. Pythons do not eat maize. I wish someone would chase some pythons and other predators on to my farm – where it is a standing rule that whoever kills a python also loses his job. Instantly.' (Moreover pythons are protected in Zambia.)

## Sea Eagle in Scotland

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has started an experiment to re-introduce the sea eagle in Scotland where it has been extinct since 1916. Young birds from Norway were brought to Fair Isle to be kept in cages until fully fledged when they will be released and, it is hoped, stay to breed.