



A promising new colour variant for game farmers

With colour variants in rare game being in the headlines for all the wrong reasons, 'White Saddleback' blesbok may be the way to go for breeders who want to ensure colouring won't change over time. **Gerhard Uys** examines this hardy breed.

White Saddleback blesbok, an artificially selected colour variation of the hardy indigenous antelope species *Damaliscus dorcas*, enable farmers to diversify their farming operation at negligible maintenance costs.

Dr Donnie van Zyl from Amersfoort was once told that a blesbok is the donkey of game, and that no one would be interested in White Saddleback blesbok.

A while after that comment, Van Zyl Boerdery, run by Donnie and his two sons, Marius and Deon, sold Mnumzane, one of their prize blesbok, for a staggering R4,2 million – and a business was born.

White Saddlebacks were first observed in the 1970s near Postmasburg by

breeder Johan Lambrechts' family. A farmer in Ermelo had a herd on his farm, but shot them all for biltong when the farm was sold.

When Donnie noticed the blesbok on his farm he saw a business opportunity. The hardest part, he says, was establishing the colour variant. Also, farmers shunned the idea of blesbok as rare game – although many have since changed their minds and are buying the antelope from Donnie.

Johan Lambrechts says that it is exciting being part of a success story, but it is also a great responsibility to ensure sustainability.

"You don't want to be part of something with great potential and then it falls flat because of bad management. That's why we started the breeders' association. The process

ABOVE: A White Saddleback ram. The WSBBA does not breed animals if the pigmentation is not 100% correct. PHOTOS: GERHARD UYS

must be approached scientifically," he says.

In 2009, Donnie and Johan started a joint breeding programme. Five years later, the White Saddleback Blesbok Breeders' Association (WSBBA) was formed with eight other breeders to maintain breed standards.

ANIMALS WITH SUB-STANDARD COLOURING ARE OFFERED FOR BILTONG

There are simple principles that the Saddleback has to meet to be viable as a business. The herd must be sustainable and adapted to the climate it lives in. The animal must be hardy and able to go on by itself and

not rely on feed or have to be coddled by humans.

With criticism levelled against the colour variant industry, with instances of animals changing colour as their diets change, the blesbok is a safe bet, as its colour variation results from a genetic variation and will not change.

ENSURING THE REAL DEAL

The breeders' association has criteria that have to be met for a blesbok to be registered as a White Saddleback. The animal must not be a mixed with other species, for instance.

Charné Buitendach, technical advisor for Wildlife Stud Services (WSS), where genetic testing is done to determine parentage and records are kept for breeding



A White Saddleback ram in the foreground with splits in the background. Saddlebacks occur naturally from normal blesbok. They were first seen in the Northern Cape in the early 1970s and also in the Ermelo district.



programmes, says that DNA tests have established that Saddlebacks are pure blesbok and not merely blesbok-bontebok hybrids.

They also occur naturally and genetic mutations in colour do not affect an animal's performance, says Charné.

WSS parentage tests are used to determine breeding programmes so that inbreeding is avoided and genetic variation in populations are increased.

The parentage can be determined to 99,96% certainty and buyers receive a DNA-verified certificate from WSS showing the parentage and family tree.

The WSBBA does not breed animals if the pigmentation is not 100% correct and Donnie offers animals with sub-standard colouring for biltong hunting at R1 000/animal.

How genetics is transferred is not exactly known, but breeders have

established a pattern that can be predicted. Firstly, Donnie has found that whenever he breeds a White Saddleback ram and a White Saddleback ewe, a White Saddleback lamb is delivered. Despite this, he feels that it still cannot be guaranteed.

Secondly, mating a White Saddleback ram with a normal blesbok ewe will result in a split lamb. These split lambs can be either a white or brown.

Thirdly, a White Saddleback ram and a split ewe produce White Saddleback lambs 40% of the time.

Lastly, a split ram and a normal blesbok ewe have split lambs 50% of the time.

THE RETURNS

One can therefore breed with splits to obtain a White Saddleback, says Donnie. The economy of this makes sense with buyers often not able to afford a White Saddleback.

TOP: With breeding expanding considerably, Donnie Van Zyl now employs six workers where he had previously employed only two. From left: Richard Nhlabathi, Bongani Mashinini, Sphamandla Zondo, Elliot Hlatswayo, Gideon Mnisi, Nomsa Mnisi, and Donnie and Deon van Zyl.

ABOVE: A mix of splits and White Saddlebacks.

ABOVE RIGHT: Two White Split Saddleback rams on the left with two White Saddleback rams.

"A buyer bought two split rams from me for R70 000 each three years ago. This year he sold the lambs for R3 million," says Donnie.

"If you buy a White Saddleback and put it on a normal blesbok ewe of R3 000, you can have Saddlebacks in three years.

"Then you can sell Saddlebacks in four years, but you still have the ewe and the splits. Your original purchase becomes worth more and you also build offshoots."

Referring to return on investment when breeding on large scale, John says: "If you start with a single ram and 40 ewes

FAST FACTS

- White Saddleback blesbok do not change colour.
- They are ideal for farmers who want to expand their assets as they need little grazing, are adaptable and have low input costs.
- A breeder can make a profit within five years.

I believe you can start marketing the animals in four." This should recoup your initial investment.

"Thereafter you will have an equitable income if the market stays the same. If you compare the saddleback with the saddle impala then the market ought to remain stable for the next 15 years."

The initial investment is high and there is risk, such as an animal dying, but to minimise risk you take out insurance, he adds.

Donnie van Zyl runs four herds in camps between 30ha and 100ha

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE →

← in size, and says that a hectare per buck is enough on the Highveld.

Ewes stay in their camps, but rams are changed annually to avoid interbreeding. Donnie also exchanges rams with other breeders.

He brings out good ram qualities by using a technique often employed by buffalo breeders. Here, young rams are kept together in a separate camp and the competitiveness among them brings out the required qualities.

“Blesbok adapt anywhere and immediately. We have sent Saddlebacks to the Kalahari. When they exit the truck they immediately start grazing,” says Donnie.

GOOD FOR DIVERSIFICATION

Blesbok are hardy, adaptable and breed easily across the whole of South Africa. A ewe is sexually mature at 18 months and a ram at 24 months.

They are highly resistant to disease and input costs are low. “No dip is required and medicine isn’t a running cost,” explains Donnie.

He gives his animals game blocks during winter to treat them, but says the nutritional value of the Highveld grass is sufficient

for them. Blesbok also graze less than cattle.

For South Africa’s crop and cattle farmers, saddlebacks are a useful diversification to improve farming assets. They thrive on marginal ground, which does not have the best grazing or soil for crops.

The type of clients that buy from Donnie and the White Saddleback Blesbok Breeders Association differ.

‘IF YOU BUY FROM THE RIGHT BREEDER YOU WON’T FIND A DYED BUCK!’

“Two years ago, it was businessmen who bought merely on business principles,” says Donnie. “A year ago it was game and cattle farmers who wanted to diversify.

“If I want to sell a Saddleback under the [auspices of the] association I have to adhere to the standards and two independent assessors have to assess the buck before I can sell it.

“If you buy from the right breeder you won’t find a dyed buck!”

HANDSOME TROPHY HORNS

Some of the rams sold by

The race standards of White Saddleback blesbok:

1. The buck’s legs must be white up to its flanks without a dividing line.
2. There should be no confusion between the White Saddleback blesbok and the yellow blesbok. The latter is yellow on its sides.
3. The buck must have a distinct red brown saddle on its back and neck.
4. It must have a red brown stripe on its belly.
5. There must be a distinct red-brown round patch on the tail.
6. Good pigmentation is a must.
7. The horns, hoofs and eyes must have no traces of pink.
8. The genitals of the ewes must be pigmented.

Donnie have horns of at least 17 inches, which are trophy-sized. Rowland Ward, the trophy buck measurement standard adopted worldwide, and South Africa’s own Hunters Confederation of South Africa, has a minimum requirement of 16,5 inches for a blesbok trophy.

DNA-TESTED ANIMAL WITH MICROCHIPS

Donnie says that he does not buy into claims that the colour variation bubble is set to burst.

“The basis of the buying power is expanding. No one should buy saddlebacks with loaned money and the market has a lot of new entrants.”

Two years ago, Donnie had all the buck on his farm DNA-tested. Tested animals get a microchip and an eartag, and the data of each animal is stored at WSS and can be accessed by a buyer if required.

Donnie also gives a certificate to buyers confirming fatherhood.

Artificial insemination is not allowed and animals breed naturally with no interference from humans except where breeders decide what ram is placed with which ewes.

• Phone Donnie van Zyl on 082 800 2114, or email him at donnievanzyl@gmail.com. Visit vanzylboerdery.co.za. ■FW

BELOW: A mix of splits and White Saddlebacks. These animals are hardy, adaptable and breed easily across the whole of South Africa.

