

Bigger returns with Borans

The region inland of Humansdorp towards Hankey in the Eastern Cape is home to a number of Boran breeders such as **Gert Barnard**, owner of the Chan-te-Mar Stud. **Nan Smith** visited him to find out more about his nine-year-old Boran operation and this low-maintenance breed.

When the Boran breed was first introduced in South Africa, breeders faced considerable difficulty in accessing enough genetic lines to ensure sufficient variety in breeding material. But the hard work and determination of Boran enthusiasts has seen this breed thrive, establishing the Boran as a firm favourite amongst commercial cattle farmers. The breed's popularity has also been confirmed in the auction ring with high-profile buyers paying exceptional prices for these animals.

At one stage, the only way to grow a herd in South Africa was to transfer embryos from Boran females to surrogate cows. But flushing oocytes from ovaries, *in vivo* or *in utero* fertilisation, embryo transfer, specialist scientists and specialist equipment do not come cheap.

Regulations banned the importation of semen, so to get the breed started, founder and Boran farmer, Simon Hodgson, shipped embryos to South Africa from Kenya.

With the breed now firmly established in this country, expensive reproductive technology

BELOW: Chan-te-Mar cows with the Boran bull, Hapoor CFH 09 61. Boran cows maintain condition in early lactation, with a relatively reduced weight loss during the energy slump after calving. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BORAN CATTLE BREEDERS' SOCIETY OF SA



is no longer needed to the same degree. The Boran can now begin to prove its value, as more breeders market the breed to commercial cattle farmers.

A FARMER'S EXPERIENCE

Gert Barnard was a successful Johannesburg-based property developer

until he realised that the pace of work in the city was affecting his health. Gert, his first wife, Audra, and their two children relocated to a farm near Humansdorp in the Eastern Cape. "We liked the weather and there was no traffic," Gert recalls.

Sadly, Audra died in 2011. Gert is now married to Marie.

THE RIGHT BREED

It was Gert's neighbour, Jacques Steenkamp, who introduced him to the Boran breed.

"It was the crossbred calves that really did it for me," recalls Gert.



"I decided to go for Boran, even if I had to start small."

In 2007, Gert and Boran breed advisor, Adriaan Rall, selected 10 nine-month-old heifers (average price R80 000) and a bull (R280 000) at the Circle C Boran Stud auction in Excelsior, in the Free State. This was the beginning of the Chan-te-Mar Boran herd, which has since grown to a core herd of 200 breeding animals.

START-UP SCIENCE

At Chan-te-Mar, Gert established an embryo flushing facility and secured the assistance of vet, Dr Robert Treadwill, from Embrio Plus. With semen from his own and other breeders' bulls he super-ovulated and then inseminated his Boran heifers. Robert transferred the embryos into 100 crossbred surrogates.

'THEY ARE LOW-MAINTENANCE, LOW-COST ANIMALS THAT GIVE CATTLEMEN GOOD RETURNS'

"The take was good," says Gert. "We had an 82% calving rate with 48 heifers and 34 bull calves."

Selected bulls not retained for breeding were sold at auction. As potential sires to other herds, they sold for between R30 000 and R80 000, adding value to the operation. Animals that did not meet breed requirements were slaughtered.

Boran prices are stabilising now as the market matures, but Gert is unconcerned about the breed losing value. At the 2015 Boran National Auction, a cow and calf sold for R85 000 and a bull for R240 000.

"These are good prices by any standard," he says.

Chan-te-Mar's vegetation is dominated by fynbos and bushveld

thickets, and rainfall is between 400mm/year and 600mm/year.

Wide-ranging grazers and browsers, Boran can forage successfully in many different vegetation zones including the fynbos and bush found here.

The resilient Boran has the capacity to withstand low temperatures and wet conditions, as well as hot, humid conditions.

The area is rife with tick-borne disease, heartwater, redwater and gall sickness. Gert says that the longer he farms Boran, the more he realises how remarkable these East African cattle really are.

"As time went by, I noticed that they never got sick. In nine years of farming Boran, I haven't lost a single animal to disease."

This is despite the fact that some of his cattle

have been brought in from other parts of the country and put straight onto the veld, with home groups.

"I've lost some of my surrogates to tick-borne disease, but never a Boran," he says.

In summer, the Boran are dipped every three months, while commercial crossbred cattle (*Bos taurus* types) are dipped every two weeks.

"I don't need to check my Boran more than once a fortnight, but the other breeds I have here must be seen every day," says Gert.

Boran are known to have a strong herd bond and groups stay closely together. "Because it's so difficult to separate one animal from the herd, it's tough for predators and stock thieves to succeed," says Gert. "In Kenya, they



ABOVE: A resilient and well-adapted breed, the Boran grazes and browses in veld types ranging from Acacia savannah to the fynbos and shrub thicket of the Eastern Cape.

are slaughtered off the veld at about 400kg live weight."

He has visited that country to see the herds first-hand. "There, groups of bulls range freely in the bush and are slaughtered and sold direct to consumers."

BREEDING

Chan-te-Mar Boran cows calve year-round, peaking in spring and early summer with a weaker peak in late autumn. Cow and heifer groups are run separately.

The cows calve easily on veld with minimal attention.

"The only supplement I give them is a phosphate lick in winter," says Gert.

A senior breed inspector, he selects the bulls he wants to use, placing fertility and adaptability at the top of his list of desirable traits. Fertility is the most important selection trait for him.

"I have a few tried and tested, reliably fertile lines," he explains. "To keep the fertility strong, we cull heifers that are not in calf by 30 months.

"Before I buy a bull, I look at his calves. Breeders are spoilt for choice – there are now excellent bulls from different genetic lines in South Africa."

Boran have a unique connection to humans, Gert claims, perhaps due to long association with herdsman.

"It's a mysterious and profound bond that one senses intuitively," he explains. "They're low-maintenance, low-cost animals that give cattlemen good returns. We just love them."

• Gert Barnard will host a farmers' day at Chan-te-Mar on 18 September, followed by the 10th B4 Boran Sale on 19 September. Phone him on 083 278 2116 or email chantemar@igen.co.za.