

Capitalising on unused land with Boer Goats

By Lindi Botha

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The subtropical Lowveld is hardly prime goat country, but with good management, a farmer can add a valuable component to the crops cultivated in the area. Divan Maritz spoke to Lindi Botha about how he manages his goat stud of 300 animals for optimal farm profitability in this climate.



The veld condition in the Lowveld varies drastically from season to season, with the winter providing hardly any grazing.

Photo: Supplied

The goats of Koati Boer Goat Stud graze in areas lush with grass, alongside verdant nut orchards. It's a far cry indeed from the arid farms in South Africa's western regions, where goat production thrives.

While nut farming on its own has been enormously profitable over the past few years, a wise farmer will always seek to utilise every square metre on his or her farm to its optimum. In this case, the goats serve to kill several birds with one stone.

"We have a lot of unused land on the farm that's not suited to nut orchards, but where the veld and weeds grow rampant," explains Divan Maritz, owner of Koati Boer Goat Stud in Schagen, near Mbombela in Mpumalanga.

“Monkeys would breed there, creating a problem for the nuts when they descend into the orchards to feed. The goats can now feed on those unused pieces of veld, earning us an additional income while also solving the problem with the monkeys [by denying them an ideal breeding area].”

The stud was started in 2018 to complement the macadamia and pecan nut divisions on the farm. When the decision was made to add a livestock division, it was especially important that the animals were hardy, as the disease load is fairly high due to the subtropical climate.

“We have heartwater, and the goats must be dipped every week. We deworm regularly, and wireworm is especially a problem. This makes my input costs a little higher than on farms in the Northern Cape, for example. This is why we went for a stud rather than a commercial herd, as the value of the animals is higher,” says Maritz.

He adds that if he had opted for a commercial herd, at least 1 000 ewes would have been needed to break even. Instead, the stud consists of a comfortable number to manage: 300 animals, with 130 breeding ewes and 20 rams that graze on 25ha of pecan orchards and 30ha of veld, in addition to the camps where they receive pellets.

Optimal nutrition

To the outsider, it would seem that the grazing produced by the 1 000mm of annual rain is ample. But Maritz points out that while kikuyu flourishes in the camps, its nutritional value is not sufficient for the goats. His strategy is therefore to feed the goats at an optimal level in order to ensure healthy animals and good reproduction.

“Goats are not like sheep that can grow on grazing alone. They need pellet feed to really put on weight and stay in good shape. We therefore cut the grass regularly in the summer so that they are enticed towards the pellets.”

The ewes receive 1% of their total body weight in pellets per day and can graze the farm. The rams stay in their camps and don't graze. They receive pellets equalling 4% of their total weight per day.

The goats are allowed into the pecan orchards in spring and summer, when there are no nuts on the ground. Maritz notes that he keeps the trees skirted to prevent the goats from feeding on leaves. They don't eat the immature nuts on the tree. The macadamia orchards are off limits, however, as the goats would cause too much damage there, with the branches being closer to the ground.

The grazing areas have no set stocking rate, as the available pasture differs drastically from season to season.

“In winter, there’s just about nothing and you wouldn’t even be able to keep one goat on a hectare. In summer, on the other hand, we have hopelessly too much pasture and have to send the tractors in to cut the grass, or we wouldn’t even be able to get into those areas.

“Because this is natural greenery and not planted pasture, the nutritional value is quite low, so it’s not worth baling the grass that’s cut. We live in a citrus area and have access to fruit that doesn’t make the grade. Many farmers utilise this for feed, but nothing beats pellets for nutrition and building body mass, so for us, fruit isn’t worth it.”

The area is notorious for its abundance of Lantana weed, which is toxic to animals. Fortunately, this has not proven to be fatal to the Koati goats.

“They seem to only nibble a bit on these shrubs, but because their tolerance for poisonous plants is quite high, it doesn’t affect them. Castor bean trees are prevalent, however, and can cause problems, so we chop them down,” says Maritz.

Reducing the interkidding period

The breeding cycle is run throughout the year with the aim of reducing the interkidding period (IKP) from the current 260 days to 220 days. This is a particular challenge in the Lowveld due to the high parasite load and less-than-optimal climate, which make it more difficult for the ewes to conceive. As the herd’s genetics improve, Maritz believes a lower IKP will be easier to achieve.

Ewes are placed with rams for the first time at 12 months or 50kg. Two months after kidding, the ewes are placed with the rams again. If more than 40 ewes need to be mated, a company is brought in to perform artificial insemination on the surplus ewes.

The source of the semen varies depending on the genetic needs of the herd: fresh and frozen semen from the Koati rams and bought-in semen are both used. In addition, a follow-up ram is placed with the inseminated ewes.

“Since no more than 25 ewes are placed with a ram at once, the ewes that are inseminated are split into two groups. Half are placed in a camp with the ram whose semen was used, and then 10 days later the other group is placed with another ram.

“That way, we can work out which ram is the sire when the ewe kids,” Maritz explains.

Optimal breeding

Breeding ewes are kept for 10 years on average and Maritz is currently focused on extending this period to improve efficiency.

“If a ewe has proved herself to be a good mother that produces quality kids, it’s far better to keep breeding her instead of using a new ewe and having to wait and see how she breeds. While the industry standard for ewe replacement is around eight years, you can stretch it if you look after your ewes well.

“This means feed must be optimal to get her back into good shape as quickly as possible after lambing. If a ewe isn’t in optimal condition, she shouldn’t be mated,” says Maritz.



Divan Maritz’s ewes are mated for the first time at 12 months old, or when they have reached 50kg.

To determine whether a ewe is in top condition, a portion of skin on her tail bone is pinched, and a scoring system based on looseness of the skin is used. Maritz does not mate his ewes if they score less than 2,5 out of five. Rams are kept for between 18 months and two years before being replaced.

Just before the breeding season, all ewes are evaluated to determine which genetic traits are needed. Ewes are then placed accordingly with a ram in a camp.

“Traits we look for are very much aligned with the breed standard, with special attention paid to her build and teats. At the end of the day, you’re producing meat, so paying attention to build is important as the progeny needs to put on as much meat as possible.

“They must also be functional, so if you have a ewe with a smaller rump, you need to mate her with a ram that is wider. In this way, you produce ewes that will kid easier,” Maritz explains.

The average birth rate of the ewes is 190%, and they achieve a weaning rate of 90%. Kids are weaned at 100 days, with ewe kids at 22kg and ram kids at 25kg.

Maritz notes that the birthweight needs to be managed carefully so that kids aren't too small, but also not so big that the ewe struggles to give birth.

“We try to keep the kid's weight at 4kg, whether it is a single, twin or triplet. We aim for twins and triplets, but try to avoid quadruplets. The ewe needs to be a very good mother to be able to handle triplets.”

Ewes produce colostrum for two days after they have lambed and it's essential that the kids ingest as much of this as possible to boost their immune systems. Maritz keeps frozen colostrum that is fed to kids if the mother hasn't produced enough. Each kid needs to get about 150ml of colostrum for optimal efficacy.

While goats can withstand both heat and cold, greatly fluctuating temperatures within a single day can pose problems. Kids are then especially prone to pneumonia and are therefore given the Super Boost supplement to improve their immune systems.

New kids are born every three months so that birthing is spread over the year. This ensures regular cash flow and makes up for the animals that have been culled from the herd.

Buying quality genetics

Maritz says the best decision he has made for his business was to start off with good-quality animals.

“My first 15 ewes are still the best in the herd. Having good genetics from the start has meant that we could advance that much quicker. If you kick off with average genetics, it takes you so much longer to get to where you need to be, and in that time it costs you money.

“Some farmers use a strategy of buying a cheaper ram and extra ewes, but I believe in buying a better ram and fewer ewes if money is tight. Your ram has a far bigger effect on the herd than your ewes. On 100 kids, the ram has a 50% influence, but a ewe has a 50% impact on only her two or three kids.”

Maritz is a strong advocate for record-keeping, ensuring that all figures, from weaning weights and ages to IKPs and conception rates, are captured. He expects to see the same figures from animals he buys.

“It’s important to know exactly what you’ll be getting from an animal; without accurate record-keeping, you’re breeding blind. Farmers buying your animals also need to know what they’re buying, and so prices are better for animals whose records have been kept,” he says.

Since many of South Africa’s best goat farmers are situated in drier climates, Maritz has to put new animals that he buys in through an acclimatisation period. A blocking treatment of Terramycin is given to prevent heartwater infections for a month or two before the animals join the rest of the herd.

Insatiable demand for goats

Although overall demand for goats subsided somewhat over the past year due to foot-and-mouth disease and the subsequent closing of export markets, the local market for goats remains strong.

Maritz notes that the export market is a key factor in keeping prices high, although appetite in South Africa itself is very good.

“There are not enough goats in the whole of South Africa to meet the demand.”

The closest auction house for Maritz’s animals is in Pretoria, and he and four other Lowveld farmers will host their next auction on 18 May. He also shows his animals twice a year, and although it is costly to round off the animals, it does provide a marketing boost.

The Koati Boer Goat Stud has proven its value to Maritz’s business, complementing the nut farm and providing a steady income. “Managing a stud is very intensive, but it’s not overly challenging. For us in the Lowveld, parasites are the biggest issue, but they can be managed.”

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