

The Indigenous Goat Breeds That Contributed To Boer Goat Evolution

Several years ago I read an article in *Goat Farmer*, a magazine published in New Zealand. This article described an early ancestor of the South African Boer Goat called the skilder goat or Skilderbokke. The skilderbokke is an indigenous goat that has survived in Africa for perhaps thousands of years. The skilderbokke is a black goat with white speckles or a red goat with white speckles and both varieties can have a Roman nose just like a South African Boer goat.

I didn't think much more about these goats at the time but over the past several years I have become more interested in the origins of the South African Boer goat and how it evolved from indigenous goat breeds in South Africa. This article shares what I have found through my research and reading. I hope that you enjoy it.

A couple of years I googled "skilder goat" and several websites came up including one produced by the Indigenous Veldt Goat Club. This site discussed the various indigenous breeds of goat that flourished and survived in the hot desert climate in Southern Africa with little or no human intervention. Survival of the fittest and natural selection produced very hardy goats that were disease resistant and heat tolerant. These goat breeds are the foundation of the South African Boer goat.

One of the articles that appears on the Indigenous Veldt Goat Club website is entitled, "*A Guide to the Identification of the Natural Indigenous Goats of Southern Africa*" which was compiled by J.W. Morrison in September 2007. In this compilation Morrison lists four breeds of indigenous goats that all have multi-colors, lob ears (similar to those found in Boer goats) and in some cases spots (dappled) or speckles (similar to what is seen in roan Boer goats). The color variations range from white to black with various shades of gray, red or tan. These breeds are as follows:

Nguni Type Goats (Mbuzi's)



Eastern Cape Xhosa



Northern Cape Speckled (Skilder) goats



Kunene Type (Kaokoland area)



I am including pictures of examples of each of these breeds in this article. These pictures are all from the Indigenous Veld Goat Club website (<http://www.indigenousveldgoats.co.za>). In studying these pictures of the various breeds I noticed that natural selection and survival of the fittest over many years in Africa has resulted in goats that have all of the desirable traits that are listed in the South African Boer Breed Standard.

As you review the pictures note the femininity in the head and neck of the females as well as nicely shaped tight udders with teats that do not extend below the hock on the rear leg. Notice also that the females of breeding age are deeper in the flank than in the heart girth which is a further sign of femininity as the deeper capacity in the rear allows room to hold developing kids. Note the sound feet and legs on all of the animals and the dark hooves and horns which would indicate adequate pigmentation and protection from the sun against skin cancer. The females have medium bone size and don't overwhelm you with their massiveness. The females appear to have good maternal traits that provide for adequate milk production.

In the males notice the signs of masculinity which include a strong physical bearing, a regal appearance and depth in the heart girth that exceeds the topline length. The males need to be massive in the front end as they have to fight and compete for the females at breeding time. The males are masculine and the female are feminine. Properties that include fertility and good maternal traits will provide for continuing propagation of the species.

In order to survive in a hot desert climate and survive against predators it appears that these indigenous breeds have developed camouflage patterns with spots and speckles that allow them to hide in the brush from predators. Note the final picture in this article of a herd of skilder goats that are black with white speckles to blend in so well with the environment that you have to look hard to see them. Nature and natural selection have done a wonderful job of evolution with these goats.

Other traits that may not be apparent from the pictures that contribute to sustainability and survivability are short thick hair, heavy sebaceous glands or oil in the skin, high vascularity in the skin allowing the goat to wiggle its skin to repel flies, ticks or parasites and in many cases a Roman nose that allows for increased nasal capacity to cool the blood as it goes to the brain.

If you ever wondered where the spotted Boer goats that are so popular in the U.S. at the present time look at the pictures of the Eastern Cape Xhosa goats with their red skin and white dappled spots.

Another article that is partially included in the Indigenous Veld Goat Club website is entitled, “The Origin and Description of Southern Africa’s Indigenous Goats” by Q. P. Campbell. In his article Campbell traces the origin of these indigenous goat breeds as they made their way to Southern Africa from the top of Africa through a tsetse fly free corridor on the eastern coast over many years. It was not an easy journey and took a long time.

Campbell makes some general comments that provide a summary about what he calls the Veld Goat. These comments appear below:

“General – The Veld Goat is indigenous to southern Africa. It almost disappeared with the purifying of the Boer Goat. Over centuries the Veld Goat survived a long and dangerous journey through Africa, and its genes is to a marked extent, developed by natural selection. These goats are naturally bred for functional efficiency; they move with ease and can walk long distances; they are antelope like with longer legs; cow hocks and sickle hocks can occur; they can either graze or browse on a wide variety of plants, shrubs and grasses. They are highly fertile even from a young age, have a long breeding season and produce offspring the year through, and have a long productive lifespan. Their meat is succulent with good flavour, and very low in cholesterol. They are multi-coloured, speckled (“skilder”), dappled (“apple”), or solid coloured patterns, due to their different colourations, they are difficult to spot by predators. They have excellent herding instinct to help protect themselves from predators, and will even fight them off with their sharp horns. The Veld Goat ewes are known for their remarkable mothering abilities, and protection of their offspring.

Due to their hard brown hooves, there is almost no sign of growing claws. They are highly tick and parasite tolerant. Naturally polled goats may occur occasionally.” (taken from “The origin and description of southern Africa’s indigenous goats” – Q.P. Campbell)

The following is also an excerpt from Campbell’s article that briefly describes how some black tribes acquired some of these indigenous goats:

“Subsequently, by means of barter or raiding, the Khoikhoi also acquired goats and the Black people acquired fat-tailed sheep. In fact, Barrow (1801) wrote that near the Hartbees river in the Northern Cape, he encountered some “Namaqua Hottentots who possessed a herd of small handsome goats that were speckled like the leopard.” The South African farmers called these goats “skilderbokke” or speckled goats. Black farmers, coloured farmers and white farmers soon recognised the fact that these indigenous goats could live on almost every sort of plant material on a farm and could survive and reproduce under extremely unfavourable conditions. Indigenous goats spread rapidly over Southern Africa and were used to produce milk, meat, skins and were also used in numerous trading deals with traveling traders by all farmers.” (“The origins and description of southern Africa’s indigenous goats” – Q. P. Campbell)

If you have read the history of the South African Boer goat you might recognize the excerpt above as it appears there also.

I thought it would be interesting to include a copy of the Speckled Goat Breed Characteristics as they appear on the website for Krinkhout Sheep. These characteristics appear below:

Speckled goats breed characteristics

1. Distinctive characteristics

This is a medium to large frame goat, rather well-muscled, with large drooping lob ears. The Speckled Goat’s whole body is covered with red, red-brown or black spots and the lower part of

the legs are an almost solid dark pigmented colour. The head are protected by a concentration of colour around the muzzle, eyes and on the ears, with a white blaze on the forehead. They are highly heat and sunlight tolerant.

In respect of productivity, Dr Q P Cambell stated that the Skilder Goat is equal to, or better than any of the other types of goat breeds found in South Africa. Under favourable conditions it is common for a flock of Skilder ewes to produce a average oftwins every eight (8) months – that is a possible lambing percentage of 300% p.a.

2. Body conformation

Neck & Forequarters: The neck is slender in females and well attached to the shoulders. Males have thicker, well-muscled necks and shoulders covered with long hair. The fore arm is slender in the females and heavier in the males. The females have a fine bone structure in comparison to the heavier bon structure of the males.

Middle piece: The breed has good length and depth of body.

Hind quarters: The males and female are well-muscled on the inner and outer thighs. The breed has a sloping rump. The tail is erect and of medium size.

Legs & hooves: Legs are strong, and medium to long. Hooves are predominantly dark in colour.

3. Colour & Hair Covering

The Speckled Goat's whole body is covered with red, red-brown or black spots. The head and legs are a almost solid colour, with a white blaze on the forehead between the horns. They have a dark stripe on top of the back, and on the front of the neck. Speckled Goats have excellent pigmentation with good colouration on the most vulnerable parts of the body (muzzle, eyes, ears, top of the back, lower legs, front of the neck). Most goats have short glossy hair, and are inclined to grow cashmere in cold winters.

4. Male & Female organs

In rams the testes are of functional size and shape, equal in size and situated near the body. The scrotum normally has no split. In females the udders are normally well developed with more than enough milk for twins andeven triplets. Droopy udders, cluster teats, thick bottle-shaped teats, are undesirable.”

Note how similar many of these characteristics are to those listed in the South African Boer Goat Standard.

In the opening part of Cambell's article the following paragraphs appear. I think it is important to include these paragraphs here as they give a good overview of what marvelous species of animals have evolved and developed in Africa including various species of goats and sheep. Here are these paragraphs.

“The tip of South Africa was known to seafarers as “the fairest Cape in all the world”, but also as the “Cape of Storms”. These divergent opinions also apply to the rest of Southern Africa with its widely divergent climatic conditions and ecosystems. These systems vary from subtropical rain forests to spectacular savannah country and endless red Kalahari sand dunes. Although extremely beautiful, the natural environment of South Africa is also a cauldron containing a witches' brew that tests all living organisms to the utmost.

These variable but exacting conditions, however, also created the greatest and most beautiful collection of game animals and indigenous farm animals in the world. Some examples of these game animals are: colossal elephants, rhinoceroses and hippopotami and then graceful the kudu, eland, gemsbok, impala, giraffe, sable antelope and springbok as well as the minute dik-dik and steenbok. However, the domestic animals of South Africa such as Afrikaner cattle, Nguni, Sangas, Damara sheep, Namakwa Afrikaners, Blackhead Persians, Red head Boer goats, White Savanna

goats, Kalahari Red goats and Speckled goats also have unique and interesting colours as well as an alert and graceful conformation.

Opperman (1952) described the interaction between animals plants and the environment as follows: “These limiting factors make definite and inexorable demands which in South Africa, with its relatively changeable difficult and exacting conditions such as irregular and mostly low rainfall, create a definite pattern or fundamental standard. An organism which adapts itself to this pattern with difficulty or weakly will suffer distress. In proportion to the degree the vegetation and animal life deviates from the requisite pattern they will endure discomfort and degenerate and in the long run become extinct. Three factors – temperature, humidity and light – rule supreme and in South Africa they are generally speaking stern masters...”