

# The Boran: ideally adapted



There are 40 000 registered Boran in South Africa. These hardy animals are ideal for dry areas and harsh Southern African conditions, as they pick up condition rapidly.

In South Africa, the Boran is one of only two strains of Zebu cattle. Part of an East African livestock mosaic in which cattle have been domesticated for 2 000 years, the Boran has its origins in the southern lowlands of Ethiopia.

Boran are classified *Bos indicus* (Zebu type), but studies show two separate taurine (*Bos taurus*) influences, one from the European Near-East and the other from an African strain originating in the Saharan region.

farmers kept Boran in extensive production systems as providers of milk and meat.

The Boran has a calmer temperament than other Zebu cattle. Boran bulls can be kept in a group with relatively few difficulties, and females are also easy to handle.

## HERD INSTINCT

The pronounced herd instinct of these cattle gives them an edge over predators and ensures that they can be managed

with ease in the bush; calf losses to predators are significantly lower than is the case with many other breeds.

“The herd will protect the calves by closing around them, and calves form nursery groups when

**ABOVE:** The tendency of Boran cattle to close around each other is called ‘clumping’ by Boran beef cattle farmers  
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cows go a little further afield to forage,” says Simeon Hurwitz, Boran breeder and feedlot owner.

These traits were all essential to survival in an environment which dictated that animals had to be docile around handlers but hostile towards predators.

Boran are able to adapt rapidly to a new environment.

“This means that movement from one farm to another, or one system to another, is not such a high-risk operation and makes it easier to farm and sell animals with a clear conscience,” says Hurwitz.

## HONING THE BREED

When European breeds did not adapt easily to tropical African conditions, early Kenyan commercial cattle farmers identified the Boran as a productive indigenous animal and developed the breed to its

present-day standards. The Kenyan Boran is a proven, robust beef animal maintaining good performance in sometimes harsh conditions. Typically, these rangelands are fairly open grasslands with scattered acacias.

## ROBUST AND HARDY

The Boran has evolved to graze non-selectively and withstand dry periods. Drought is a regular feature of these regions, and the Boran can pick up condition remarkably quickly even after a severe drought. These cattle are able to cover a great deal of ground in search of pasturage, with the sickle hock adaptation helping it to walk long distances.

The Boran is tick-resistant, with a highly motile skin that constantly twitches to shake off insects. The skin also secretes an oily substance that helps to repel ticks.

**THE BREED IS DOCILE WITH HANDLERS AND HOSTILE TO PREDATORS**

This is according to geneticist Prof Olivier Hanotte, who spent 13 years at the Nairobi-based International Livestock Research Institute.

For centuries, East African nomadic cattle



The coat is short-haired and glossy, reflecting light, and the high pore density is an adaptation to heat.

Young animals develop disease resistance from birth. Boran breeder Simon Hodgson says he has found that the breed requires less dipping than other breeds.

### HIGH QUALITY BEEF

Boran and its crosses are known for more tender meat, as well as better carcass marbling and ribeye area than other Zebu breeds.

Trials run in the 1970s at an FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN) feedlot at Lanet, Kenya, showed that Boran and European crossbreeds grew 31% faster on a high-concentrate (76%) ration. South African breeders who saw the value of farming cattle known to produce high quality beef off low quality forage imported embryos in the 1990s from the Ol Pejeta Ranch near Nanyuki, Kenya.

Today, there are some 40 000 registered Boran cattle in South Africa, 50% of which are purebred, and 50% of which are upgraded animals.

Dr A Hailu, Ethiopian animal scientist, puts the mature cow weight at between 380kg and 450kg and the bulls at between 500kg and 850kg. Hailu says that veld-raised weaners are ready for slaughter at between 420kg and 460kg, a weight they reach at roughly three years. With supplementary feeding, weaners can be slaughtered at between 18 months and 22 months when they weigh 380kg to 400kg.

In commercial systems, weaning weights of leading herds average 250kg (bull calves), 210kg (heifers) and 220kg (castrated steers) at 8,5 months. Birth weights for bull calves average 28kg while birth weights for heifer calves average 25kg. At three years steers average between 450kg and 500kg and



**LEFT:** Boran are ideal for cross-breeding in communal areas. The crosses have excellent hybrid vigour and retain the disease resistance of the Boran.

**ABOVE:** These cattle are well adapted to Africa's heat. The short-haired, glossy coat reflects light, and high pore density helps with cooling. The breed's skin is thick, oily and motile, keeping ticks and insects at bay. Young animals develop disease resistance from birth.



two-year-old (mateable) heifers average 320kg. Crossbred calves wean at weights 25% greater than purebred Boran calves. Heifers calve down between 30 months and 40 months and the lactation is between 200 days and 300 days, with an intercalving period of 11 months to 14 months. In optimal conditions, heifers can be mated at 18 months. Longevity is high, with the average number of lactations at 12, while 16-year-old bulls have viable semen and can continue to be productive sires. Cows recover quickly after calving and do not lose condition during the suckling period. Milk production is high, promoting good calf growth.

### HYBRID VIGOUR

The greater the genetic distance between animal breeds used in crossbred programmes, the better the hybrid vigour. For example,

an Angus beef animal crossed with a Hereford will not express much hybrid vigour as the breeds are not dissimilar. Crossing an Angus with a Sanga-type animal will give the farmer improved hybrid vigour because of increased genetic distance. And Boran crossed with taurine cattle will show a high degree of heterosis in the F1 cross, explains geneticist Prof Frikkie Nesor.

"They make an excellent cross, especially with breeds such as the Nguni," he says.

Boran cattle are an ideal type to introduce to communal stock farming areas, with an immediate benefit in the F1 cross, whether to breed further or market for beef. Developing cattle farmers have shown a keen interest in these animals and snap them up at auctions.

The Boran Breed Society is collaborating with the University of Fort Hare to establish a platform for research into the breed's characteristics, especially tick and disease resistance and non-selective grazing. The society is also helping to deploy postgraduate students to farms for practical experience.

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