



Waterbuck



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Waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus*)



Afrikaans:	Waterbok
German:	Wasserbock
French:	Cobe ā croissant

Worldwide confusion exists over the waterbuck's name. It is frequently and incorrectly used to refer to the lechwe and the sitatunga, two species that are considered aquatic in their behaviour. The waterbuck, however, is not aquatic but terrestrial and is usually found in close vicinity to water rich environments. Waterbuck have a reputation for smelly and unpalatable meat. This is due to a musky oil secreted by glands found primarily in the skin of the flanks which forms a waterproof layer around the hair and protects the skin when the waterbuck enters water. Many incidents have been reported where crocodile and lion have avoided preying on waterbuck because of their unpleasant smell.

The present total population numbers are estimated at 105 000 Common waterbuck and 95 000 Defassa waterbuck. The population numbers are declining.

Description

The two species *K. ellipsiprymnus* and *K. defassa* are similar in build with a strong bone structure and a skin covered with long greyish-brown hair 4-7 cm in length. The marking on the rump, the eyebrows, the line around the muzzle and the patch on the throat are white. The white marking on the rump of the Defassa waterbuck is a solid patch while the other waterbuck have a distinctive, 4 cm thick white ring. The colour of the pelage varies between locations and sub-species. The Typical Defassa waterbuck is a rich reddish brown, the Ugandan Defassa a pale grey with short hair, Crawshy's Defassa a dark grey, the Angolan Defassa a blackish-brown with red speckles and the Sing-sing Defassa has a light sandy-brown back with dark brown flanks and a white underside. The Ellipsen waterbuck sub-species are greyish-brown.

Adult bulls are 20-25% heavier than adult cows. Old bulls tend to become smelly as a result of the secretions of the subcutaneous oil glands. With a light breeze, experienced hunters claim they can smell them up to 500 m away.

Trophy

Horns are only carried by bulls, reach an adult length of 60-80 cm and are v-shaped and curve forward. They have 18-38 prominent grooves across 60-70% of the length and smooth tips. Rudimentary horn growths are sometimes found in cows. The best trophy quality is generally found in outcast, post-mature, solitary bulls aged over ten years. Horn buds appear at four months and the mature length is reached after five years. The Rowland Ward minimal trophy standard is reached at an age of seven years.



Photo: Doug Lee

Habitat requirement

Waterbuck are mostly found in grassy savannah plains with open woodland or scattered bush clumps and are always within 1.8 km of the nearest permanent drinking water. The Defassa waterbuck inhabits denser bush and savannah forests and is generally limited to areas with an annual rainfall of at least 750 mm, while the Ellipsen waterbuck inhabit drier regimes with a rainfall as little as 300 mm. Both species occur from sea level to altitudes of 2 100 m.

Floodplains, riverine areas and marshes with scattered trees and shrubs generally provide an optimum habitat, as are broken bushveld thickets with a dense leaf canopy providing an abundance of shade, and a humid herbaceous stratum such as that of the Eastern Cape Valley Bushveld. Ample shade for protection against the midday sun is essential but closed thickets with little space for movement are usually avoided. Waterbuck are frequently encountered climbing small hills and ridges and the foothills of mountains near permanent water sources. The grass layer must be dense, medium to tall (8-65 cm) sweet or mixedveld. Overgrazed veld or veld with a plant structure that has been changed by other large animals is not suitable. There are reports of waterbuck leaving habitats due to increased nyala competition.