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September 2021

Alex Hatton interviews an old friend who's doing more than most for conservation across a changing landscape

Hunters are animal lovers. We know it, but outside our community many see us as cold blooded killers. When I recently became aware of a friend of mine on a personal mission to save roe kids, I felt it was too good to let it go unnoticed. I first met Michael Sommer back in 2012, when we were introduced through a mutual contact, and I have since hunted boar with Michael on a few occasions. As a forester and hunter, Michael spends a lot of time hunting, so this year's focus to save roe kids certainly intrigued me as to how exactly he has managed to find the time to take on more work!

AH: Michael, tell us about you.

MS: My name is Michael Sommer. I am a 48 year old self employed forest engineer, running a company www.forstkontor-sommer.de, which I've done for 18 years now, managing private forest grounds and hunting estates in Germany. As skilled specialists and foresters on different grounds, we organise, arrange and control all the forest

work, from planting, thinning and logging, up to the timber sales and hunting management. We are located in the southern part of North Rhine-Westphalia, the 'Sauerland', about one hour east of Cologne, a country formed and dominated by rolling hills and vast spruce forests.

In 2018, we got hit by an incredible infection and invasion of a small beetle, killing our healthy and rich spruce stands. The countryside is changing dramatically and it appears to be the end of pretty much all our spruce. Dead forests as far as you can see.

In my 'mixed up' position as a passionate hunter and forester dealing with the landowners of private forests, and their different expectations on their properties, in combination with this catastrophe, hunting and deer management became an even more important part of my business.

When not hunting or working, I love to be outdoors, training and working my schweisshund, Albo, for tracking. I also love cycling, hiking and climbing and spending some

BELOW: The field cleared and the farmer can get on with the job without worrying about potential accidents

"I HAD THE IDEA OF A PROFESSIONAL WAY OF ROE KID RESCUE, SUPPORTED BY DRONES AND THERMAL CAMERAS"





...ing edge...
is vital to the task, but
it's been the impact of
bringing people together
from such divergent
groups that's had the
biggest impact.



time with my family. Since 2019, I started my own little YouTube channel, WaldundWildTV, which became another really interesting hobby for me.

Unfortunately, due to Covid 19, my other passion, swap hunts around the world, needed to be reduced down to zero. I can't wait to be with my friends from abroad and especially the UK!

AH: Tell us a bit about how hunting works in Germany.

MS: As in the UK, hunting rights in Germany belong to the landowner. If it is only a small bit, below 75 hectares, those small bits are put together to build a landowners community, which then rents out the hunting rights to someone who has passed the German hunting test and has the right to rent a hunting ground. It is usually a minimum period of 5 years +, so, the hunter should be interested in maintaining a proper and healthy deer population and work alongside the interests of farmers, foresters, etc.

In most cases, you, as the leaseholder, are responsible for any damage occurring on crops, farmland and forest plants, caused by deer, boar, rabbits or pheasants, so it's up to you to avoid the damage or be ready to pay compensation if it happens.

Recently, we have noticed a change in the landowners' mindsets; they're moving away from renting out the hunting rights. Instead, they ask skilled and passionate hunters to take over the hunting rights and deal with the deer and boar populations in a proper, sustainable and ethical way. As I said, this part of my business is growing.

AH: So now on to your most recent 'hobby', saving roe kids. How did you get to his point?

MS: This is a long story, but first of all, over here it is the farmer's responsibility to avoid any animal getting injured while farming (mainly mowing). There have been several cases here in which the farmers had to pay huge fines – animal welfare is to a very high standard over here.

These days, there are no farmers at all who injure or kill an

ABOVE: A drone's eye view of the action with thermal imaging the job a lot easier

ABOVE RIGHT: The DJI drone makes what would be an impossible task fairly straightforward

the meadow until it is cut, which might take days, with a high risk of not finding every kid.

In 2019, I searched a huge meadow on one of my grounds, and found some roe kids, both of which were mowed down by the farmer in front of my children.

Something had to change – so I started the idea of a more professional way of roe kid rescue, supported by drones and thermal cameras.

There were hurdles such as the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, some legal regulations, and the question of funding such a project, but in the spring of 2021, we started our 'Wendische Kitzrettung' project.

The goal is as simple as possible: save as many roe kids, young animals, hares, etc as possible before they get killed by the mowers!

AH: Do the farmers support this initiative? Less roe kids would obviously mean less damage to the crops. Have your hunting opponents ever tried to make out this was just saving more so you could shoot more?

MS: Oh yes, farmers do support this project in a variety of ways. First of all, we didn't get any support from any governmental program, so the costs were completely taken over by sponsors – and one of our biggest sponsors is the local farmers' association. They support us to get the risk for

BELOW: The roe has to be the prettiest deer and a real waster if accidentally killed by the farmer



hunters – so this is a massive win for wildlife in general. Farmers, unlike foresters, don't see roe as intense crop damage but as very small and selective browsers, nibbling on herbs here and there; their damage to crops is much smaller than from the bigger (non selective) browsers such as fallow, red or sika deer.

The last point is a very interesting one. We set up the project as a sub-group of a local mountain biking club, a group which is also 'suspicious' to landowners and hunters. The reason was simple: the local hunting community was just too slow, lazy and less interested to provide us the support we needed.

Youth education, nature conservation, and public relation was listed in the club's statutes, so a roe kids rescue project fitted in perfectly and was a great way of bridging the gap between groups and bringing together landowners, farmers, hunters, mountain bikers, the public in general and people interested in nature from our villages.

To this day, no one has asked why save those roe now and shoot them a couple of months later. That is in my eyes another great result and a real media coup for us: hunters, mountain bikers and farmers all coming together as part of the local rural infrastructure!

AH: How has your roe rescue worked and who do you do it for?

MS: We get called and assigned either by the farmer, landowner or hunter. We start around 30 minutes before daylight. Usually, we know where to fly 24 hours before, so we can program the flight route onto the navigation system of the drone.

We are a team of 4 or more people: a pilot, a spotter on a separate monitor, and two people with radios and baskets to carry the roe kids away from the meadows and store them under the basket till the grass is cut. There is a maximum of 3 hours between catch and release!

We fly between 35m and 60m above the ground, then guide the team to the kid by radio. They use gloves and grass, put it in the basket and carry it out into a safe place so it cannot run back.

After cutting, either the farmer or a member of the team releases the kid again (who mostly sleep). Often, the doe is already waiting next to the basket! In several cases, we released the kid and the doe gave milk to the kid straight away.

AH: Now on to the tech side of things, what equipment are you using?

MS: We use the Mavic Enterprise Advanced drone with a dual thermal and 4K camera. Plus, we use radios, baskets (ground anchors are important!), a small but powerful generator for recharging, and tons of batteries.

In the season (pretty much all of May), we fly every day

should soon be big enough to run off and out of the way. From then on, we offer our help in detecting crop damage (and investigating the size), finding boar in maize fields etc.

We have also established a partnership with the local fire department for supporting them in case of forest fires, the local police, for tracking and trailing with the drones, and the forest service for beetle damage research. This gives the drone more varied applications and more general use for the wider community.

AH: Do you think this positive story helps to build relationships for a common goal?

MS: 100%! We did use and abuse social media to show the public very graphically what we do, what happens if we don't do what we do, and who we are. The response was incredible, 100% positive, not a single negative comment and a level of public support we didn't even dream of. The feedback, especially from the hunting community, was amazing. Why not use these kinds of activities to show hunting and hunters in a different and much more positive way? It requires some investment, a strong will, a great team and endless hours of effort, but for us it is well worth it! 🇧🇪

BELOW: Hunting and conservation are very often one and the same, a fact many ARS fail to understand

Another kid saved, but it's the positive spin in terms of PR that finally proves the hunt community are true conservationists not just killers.

