

In search of the elusive saola

Bill Robichaud fights to save one of the world's rarest creatures

by CATHERINE CAPELLARO

APRIL 6, 2017



MICHAEL HIRSHON

When one of the most important zoological discoveries of the century was announced in 1992, field biologist Bill Robichaud happened to be sitting in a noodle shop in Vientiane, Laos, reading the *Bangkok Post*. The article had an inset map showing the location of a Vietnamese village where a set of long, tapered horns — unlike any known to science — were found in a hunter's shack. "I thought, that thing's in Laos, for sure," says Robichaud. "Three days later I was down on a bus to that part of Laos." By now, we have a name for the mysterious cloven-hoofed creature, the saola (pronounced sow-LAH).

The importance of that discovery still animates Robichaud, who studied zoology at UW-Madison and now lives outside Barneveld. It turns out the saola is the only surviving line of a genus of bovid, a grazing animal related to cattle, bison, goats and antelopes. "This wasn't a new species of something else; this was an entirely new type of mammal that doesn't look like anything else, and it had gone undetected," says Robichaud. "Even the Vietnamese biologists in Hanoi didn't know about it. And villagers didn't know it was anything special. I think it was, without doubt, the most surprising zoological find of the 20th century."

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Robichaud assumed some superstar biologists would latch onto the project and make the saola their life's work. A natural candidate would be George Schaller, who had studied tigers, mountain gorillas, jaguars and giant pandas. The subject of Peter Matthiessen's adventure tale *The Snow Leopard* had been a mentor and colleague of Robichaud's at the Bronx Zoo Wildlife Conservation Society. "I just said, 'George, you've defined your career by being the first guy to do the first-ever field study of large, unknown mammals. Why aren't you settling down in Laos and making saola your retirement project?'" Schaller's reply: "How can you study an animal you can't even see?" So Robichaud seized the opportunity to study the rare and elusive creature. "I just kept waiting for someone to take this over, and nobody did, so I just did it by default." Robichaud now coordinates a massive international effort to save the saola from imminent extinction.

As Robichaud describes it, "the saola found him." He wasn't even a mammal specialist. He had traveled to Vietnam with the Wisconsin-based International Crane Foundation in 1990, and because he loved working in the field, moved into doing wildlife surveys in the difficult terrain of Southeast Asia. A Wisconsinite who loves snow, hunting and fishing, he spent the better part of the past 20 years in steep and steamy conditions on the other side of the world, searching for a creature so rare it's described as a "unicorn."

In 2011, naturalist and author William DeBuys joined Robichaud on an expedition deep into the Nakai-Nam Theun National Protected Area in Laos, which borders Vietnam. They were seeking the saola, of course, and setting up camera traps to capture images (few photos exist of saola in the wild). They also were on a diplomatic mission to convince villagers of the importance of conserving the forest's resources.

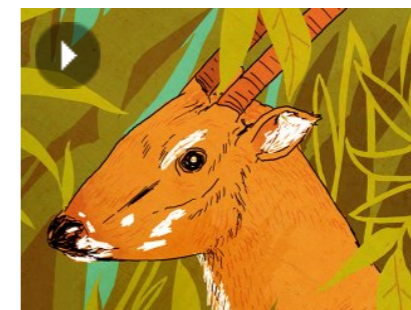
The tale of that trip — and the larger story of the global crisis in illegal wildlife poaching — is captured eloquently in DeBuys' *The Last Unicorn*, published in 2015. Both biologist and writer appear in Madison April 6 at A Room of One's Own.

The ultimate goal of the trip and the book, DeBuys writes in the prologue, was a lofty one: "to save the saola from extinction."



Bill Robichaud (right) with a survey and patrol team in Laos' Nakai-Nam Theun National Protected Area.

I traverse slippery stretches of Highway 18-151 during a mid-March snowstorm to visit Robichaud at the farm where he's made his home for the past four and a half years.



In search of the elusive saola

UW-Madison grad and Barneveld resident Bill Robichaud has carved out a singular career as a wildlife biologist,

chasing the one of the world's rarest mammals, the saola, through the forests of Laos. [more](#)

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He introduces me to his carpenter roommate, Mitch, and pours us each a coffee, which we sweeten with maple syrup tapped from trees in his yard. We sit down in front of a fireplace; the mantel features several sets of whitetail deer antlers and a Hmong sword. While the snowflakes drift down, Robichaud describes the singular journey that led him from here to Laos and back again.

Robichaud, the youngest of six children, grew up in Waukesha County, near Delafield, where he would escape every chance he could to the forest behind his house. “That’s where I really got into nature,” says Robichaud. “I lived in the woods, and I went fishing every day.” He captured and hunted with a red-tailed hawk, whom he named Genghis. When he was in high school his parents divorced, and he relocated with his mom and brother to Middleton, so the siblings could afford to attend UW-Madison by living at home.

Before starting college, Robichaud worked as an intern at the Cedar Grove Ornithological Research Station, trapping and banding hawks and falcons migrating along the Lake Michigan shores. That facility, which has been in operation since 1960, has documented a remarkable recovery for birds of prey since the pesticide DDT was banned in 1972. The comeback gives Robichaud hope that humans can learn from their mistakes: “The world is getting better, in some ways,” he says.

He shows me to the dining room, where a small framed picture of him as a teenager, with a hawk perched on his glove, is hanging near the window. Out in the snow, a juvenile bald eagle feeds on a raccoon carcass. “When I was a teenager the only place you could see a bald eagle was in the remote areas of northern Wisconsin,” he says.

This work with birds of prey led him to UW’s legendary wildlife ecologist Stan Temple and eventually to the International Crane Foundation. Robichaud conducted wildlife surveys in Vietnam and Laos, which led to coordinating the Lao program for the Bronx Zoo Wildlife Conservation Society, which he did until 1999, when he left the field to get a master’s degree in zoology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

He currently works for Austin-based Global Wildlife Conservation and coordinates the Saola Working Group, which is an arm of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

After 15 years of living in Laos (with periodic visits back to stay with his brother in Mazomanie), Robichaud wanted to reestablish roots in Wisconsin and be closer to his daughter, who is half Lao; she went to boarding school in Vermont and currently attends Smith College. “And I just missed snow,” he says.

This 1999 camera-trap photo is the first image taken of a wild saola in Laos.

By the time he wrote his master’s thesis on the saola, Robichaud already had the distinction of being the only Western scientist to study a live one. He named her Martha (after an unflappable administrator at the Wildlife Conservation Society). The saola was captured by Hmong tribesmen in 1996 and brought to the village of Lak Xao, where she became part of a private menagerie of tribal leader General Sayavong Cheng.

Once again, Robichaud was in the right place at the right time. Already in Laos, he had booked a helicopter to do a wildlife survey in the border areas, and they were planning to refuel in Lak Xao. “Two of our field members came out of the forest — this was before cell phones — and said ‘you won’t believe it; they captured a live saola,’” says Robichaud. “I told Alan [Rabinowitz, a colleague he was traveling with], ‘Look, this is the first live saola any biologist has ever had a look at, so I’m just going to stay and watch her around the clock.’” That’s exactly what he did, spending day and night in her pen. He took

measurements and photographs, wrote copious notes about everything from the size and composition of her feces to descriptions of her markings and musky scent glands. And he was with her when she took her final breath after 18 days in captivity.



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“She was amazing,” says Robichaud. “She was completely tame around people.” She lacked the usual skittishness of the other hooved mammals — species of deer and goat — that lived in the menagerie. “She would feed out of your hand. I got videos of her, and I just took a tape measure and was measuring her belly and her ears and she wasn’t doing anything,” he recalls. While some people suspected Martha was suffering some sort of trauma from her capture, Robichaud is convinced otherwise. “A monk from the local Buddhist temple came, and I was looking at her with him and commenting on how tame she was. And he said, ‘Yeah, you know, we have a nickname for this animal: We call it the *sabt-supahp*, which means the polite animal. Saolas, they just walk slowly and quietly through the forest. They don’t get upset at anything. They’re just very calm. They’re very wary, but they’re not excitable.” The only thing that got Martha agitated was the presence of dogs, another fact confirmed by numerous hunters. “Any dog that came near the pen, she would smell the dog and have a very strong reaction,” says Robichaud. In a sense, the fear of dogs may have led to Martha’s capture. “It will run down to a stream and keep the dogs at bay. They are so focused on the dogs you can just walk up to them and throw a rope around their horns or their neck.”

After Martha died, on Jan. 26, the villagers cooked and ate her. The butcher removed a male fetus — hairless, rabbit-sized, with tiny buds where the horns would have grown. The fetus was taken to the Wildlife Conservation Society office in Vientiane. “Given the endangerment of saola throughout its range,” DeBuys writes in *The Last Unicorn*, “Martha’s baby may turn out to be the most complete evidence that humanity will ever possess of the species presence on Earth. It abides behind a barrier of peeling duct tape in a dusty jar, unborn and forever floating.”

DeBuys calls Robichaud “one of the most remarkable human beings” he’s ever met. He was mightily impressed with the scientist’s wilderness savvy and his ability to relate to the Lao people: “He’s a natural leader, he has reserves of energy that seem otherworldly, and his passion and commitment for his work are completely unsurpassable.” DeBuys, who describes the physical hardships of the expedition in painstaking detail, notes Robichaud’s ability to adapt. “His tolerance for inconvenience, disruption, bad food and arduous conditions is as great as I’ve seen in any other human being,” says DeBuys. “And frankly, a conservation biologist who works in the forests of Indochina has got to have those qualities. It is one of the most remote and difficult ecosystems on Earth in which to travel and try to assess wildlife. The obstacles are enormous.”

Robichaud doesn’t remember the *Last Unicorn* trip as being one of his most difficult, but he confirms the troubles they had with the guides and porters they hired to help carry gear into the forest. “It was really trying, in that aspect,” he says. But Robichaud is used to the life of climbing slippery slopes, hiking, camping and subsisting on bony fish and

sticky rice. “I don’t know what it’s like for somebody who hasn’t done it because it’s been so long since it was the first time for me.”

Robichaud has a long history of testing his survival skills. His debut was a solo winter camping trip in Wisconsin’s Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in 1978, when temperatures plunged to record lows. “I think young men are genetically hard wired to go on a quest,” he says. “They go out and they’ve got to get the grail and bring it back to the community. I was putting myself through that initiation.” He skied into a campsite and spent several nights in a tent when the wind chill factor was -90. He slept in two sleeping bags. “I kept a candle burning in the tent and set an alarm for every hour, to make sure I was okay. It wasn’t very relaxing.”

These days, Robichaud doesn’t usually choose camping as a recreational activity: “Now I go to a warm coffee shop,” he says. He’s gifted with a strong constitution: After years of working in Laos, and watching many friends succumb to malaria, dengue fever and typhus, the worst health problem he’s faced in the field was an infected leech bite.

Rangers have removed thousands of illegal wire snares, set by poachers in the saola’s habitat.

It’s difficult to determine how many saola actually exist in the wild. When I ask Robichaud, he takes a breath: “I think if things are good, there might be 200 left. If things are bad, there might be 20. We are getting down to the finish line.”

The principal threat to saola is not village hunters shooting and roasting a saola. That is rare, since the meat is not considered particularly tasty. It’s the widespread commercial poaching, using wire snares, described in heartbreaking detail in *The Last Unicorn*.

“It’s a catastrophe. That’s not too strong of a word,” says Robichaud. Poachers, mainly Vietnamese wildlife traders, set thousands upon thousands of snares, easily constructed from bicycle or truck cable. Anything that walks through the forest is at risk of being strung up to die slowly and painfully. Since 2011, rangers have removed 150,000 snares from protected areas, but Robichaud knows it’s not enough. Demand for rare creatures continues to soar, especially in Chinese and Vietnamese urban centers, where “bush meat” is a delicacy for the growing wealthy class. In addition, practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine demand parts of monkeys, rhinos and more. One box turtle, which shares a habitat with the saola, can fetch \$20,000.

The saola, however, is so rare it has slipped under the radar, and so far, doesn’t fetch more than \$100 for a set of horns. The Saola Working Group has focused its efforts on protecting habitat and removing snares. Robichaud says it’s not that difficult to convince a Lao hunter to put down his gun when face-to-face with a saola. This “village diplomacy” stems from a solid understanding of social and economic realities for Lao people. For decades, the United Nations has considered Laos one of the world’s least-developed countries, and the Lao people “hate that,” says Robichaud. “It’s a shameful message for anybody.”

Robichaud approaches villagers with respect, and explains that they have something the rest of the world doesn’t. “They have unlimited access to land, they have a forest full of bamboo shoots and fish and mushrooms and everything else that people in cities have to pay for. As saola conservationists, we go in and say, ‘you have something the rest of the world is really interested in.’ Other than from a Vietnamese wildlife trader, they’ve never heard that, and you can see it, they get proud of having saola in the forest. The key is for them, saola conservation comes with no economic cost because they can’t make a lot of money from it in the wildlife trade.”

That’s the good news. The bad news is it truly might be too late to save the saola from

extinction. Robichaud estimates that about 10 have been caught in the past decades, but to date, every captive saola has died within five months, and no scientist has ever seen one in the wild. Meanwhile, the poaching crisis continues unabated.

An obvious question is whether Robichaud's efforts would best be spent elsewhere. "Other guys that I work with will say, 'How do you keep doing it? You can't even see what you're studying.' But this is the largest animal in the world of certain existence — I'm not talking about sasquatch — that's never been seen in the wild by a biologist. I guess I'm in love with that mystery, rather than having to see it."

Because the saola is considered "critically endangered," the efforts of the Saola Working Group have shifted, in recent years, to planning for a captive breeding program. The idea is to capture (no small task) every living saola and repopulate the forests in 15 to 20 years. A center will be built in a park in Vietnam, and a consortium of zookeepers, headed up by Poland's Wroclaw Zoo, is studying how to capture saola and keep them alive in captivity. But, Robichaud emphasizes, the goal is not a zoo exhibit where people will gawk at a creature that once roamed the forest. "There's no point in doing captive breeding if you don't have a place to put them back to," he says. "It's about keeping an insurance population until there is adequate protection in protected areas in Laos and Vietnam, where they could be safely released."

Even that is a gamble, but one that Robichaud is willing to take. The saola are important on many levels because of the wildness and diversity they represent. "The Buddha said 'no effort is wasted.'" says Robichaud, ticking off a list of new species and a new genus of rodent that have been discovered in the same mountain range (the Annamites) where the saola live in the shadows. "That's a pace of discovery of new animals unmatched by any region of the world, probably in the past century," says Robichaud.

And, he adds, all the work that has been done to pick up snares helps conserve not just saola, but everything else that's walking on the forest floor. "I hope the saola doesn't go extinct," says Robichaud. "But even if it does, we'll still have done a lot of good along the way in its name."