

Mar / Apr

2009

How To's



The
Hunting Calendar

 *The "Roar"! Jonny Dingle and a Sika stag*

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This is the time of year that we all wait for - hard antler time and the roar!!

From the start of March to the end of April things can change quite a bit for some of the deer family, beginning with the end of the antler growing period for the males. This follows sooner or later into what they actually grew them for – fighting off other males to enable them to mate with the females. The females are still eating up large to feed their almost ready to wean offspring and put on condition for the winter ahead.

Red Deer Everywhere

As Jamie has covered hunting roaring Reds in his article this issue, we'll just cover a few areas in more depth.

By March all mature red stags will be hard and rubbed up. They will be thinking about locating hinds and trying to hold them so they can service them when they start cycling.

March can be a tricky time to hunt for a stag as they seem to go quiet just prior to the roar but early on can still be a good time to catch them

out feeding up ready for all the activity to come. Hunt as you do for the summer months and you will still see deer. In late February/ early March we have always had very good success on the stags hunting the slips up creeks that are off the beaten track. They are flat out trying to put on a last bit of condition, and as they are in hard antler and mud fat, you can get a trophy and good quality venison all in one. The hinds are reaching their eating best this time of year also, and their calves are large enough to fend for themselves.

For April the focus for most hunters goes on to finding stags, and to find them, you need to find the hinds. That is where the stags will be sooner or later! Consistent performers in the North island have always been the mid to high level ridges and spurs, whether in the bush or in the alpine country not yet affected by helicopter venison recovery. Look for level spots in these areas that might hold enough water for a wallow and adjacent feed guts for the hinds and you are increasing your chances. As a lot of areas are close to major urban centres they will get more than their share of attention over this period. If you want to walk in and stay at a hut, then my tip is to hunt places closer to the road end that the chopper hunters fly past on their way in to the middle of the ranges. A quick call to most good chopper companies will let you know what

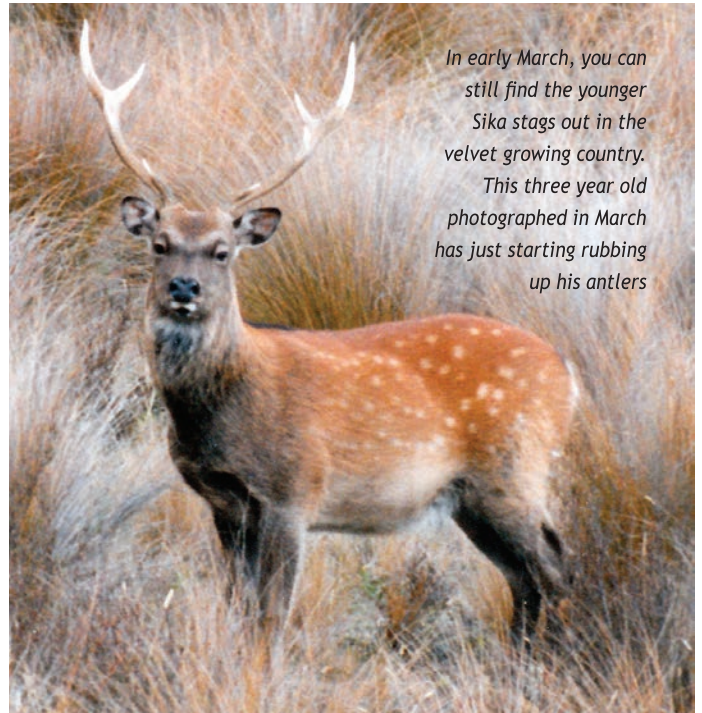
parties are where. The other way to get away from the crowds is to go fly camping. This is always the best way to get in to some undisturbed country. Focus on areas that at least two hours walk from any huts or road ends. Despite the choppers hitting the Ruahines up until the start of December, hopefully there will be the odd stag rutting up high in the tussock. That is a sight to behold!

In any farm edge country, think about access to good feed for the stags that will help them grow their antlers. You don't necessarily need private access. Look at the quality of feed and protection that living on private land provides, then find some adjoining public land that holds hinds. You may find that you can score a good stag off public land that has been feeding on nothing but the best all summer. Stags will often travel a fair way to find hinds for the roar so you don't need to hunt too close to the private land either. DOC managed land that adjoins forestry blocks can also be good. Be aware feed is only part of the story and that age and genetics play an equally big part in producing good heads.

Remember above all that this is the roar and stags can pop up in the most unexpected places. A guy I know shot a good 12 in the Wairarapa several years back that ran down the road in front of him on the way to work. It had traveled 5kms from the bush to visit the ladies on a deer farm!

SIKA

Early March still sees deer in all the easy places, feeding in the open and often emerging well before dark and staying out well after daylight as they pack on the kilos.



In early March, you can still find the younger Sika stags out in the velvet growing country. This three year old photographed in March has just starting rubbing up his antlers



If you can find somewhere that the chopper boys haven't annihilated yet, you may still find Reds rutting out on the open tops

The first of the stags will be starting to strip their velvet at the beginning of March and by the end of the first week there will be plenty rubbed out. Pretty much as soon as they do this they disappear from summer feeding areas and return to the bush to mark out territory for the upcoming rut. Younger stags will still be in velvet antler for another 2-3 weeks and these animals remain in summer terrain after the older mature animals have departed. It is certainly not unusual to hear the odd hee-haw roar from the start of March either, usually in early morning but mostly around dark. The hinds start to cycle about the 10th April and this is when the stags really fire up and roaring begins in earnest. Most action is in the morning until about 10.30 and again from about 3 pm with a lot of noise during the hours of darkness. See Issue 3 for specifics on how to hunt Sika during the roar.

WAPITI

Wapiti are not unlike Reds in a lot of ways, but they do start to rut a bit earlier. They start waking up to the fact that the time is right to breed early in March and can still be heard bugling in early to mid April. A lot of the younger bulls get shot as they can be very cocky, often walking into camp bugling their heads off. The older boys seem to know this about their younger brothers and take advantage of it, and often while hunting them in the bush you can mistake the younger bull for the herd bull. This is a catch for the inexperienced as a lot of the time the herd bull is sitting just out to the side somewhere watching what's going on. Older wapiti bulls seem to tolerate the younger bulls which can be often seen with the cows. But don't be sucked in by this because just like us humans the girls wear the trousers and decide who gets to do the tugging!

Some tough decisions need to be made by the hunter if he wants to get a worth while trophy. He will need to walk past some of the biggest sets of antlers he has ever seen, and if he manages to do this one day he maybe rewarded with the trophy of a lifetime.

FALLOW

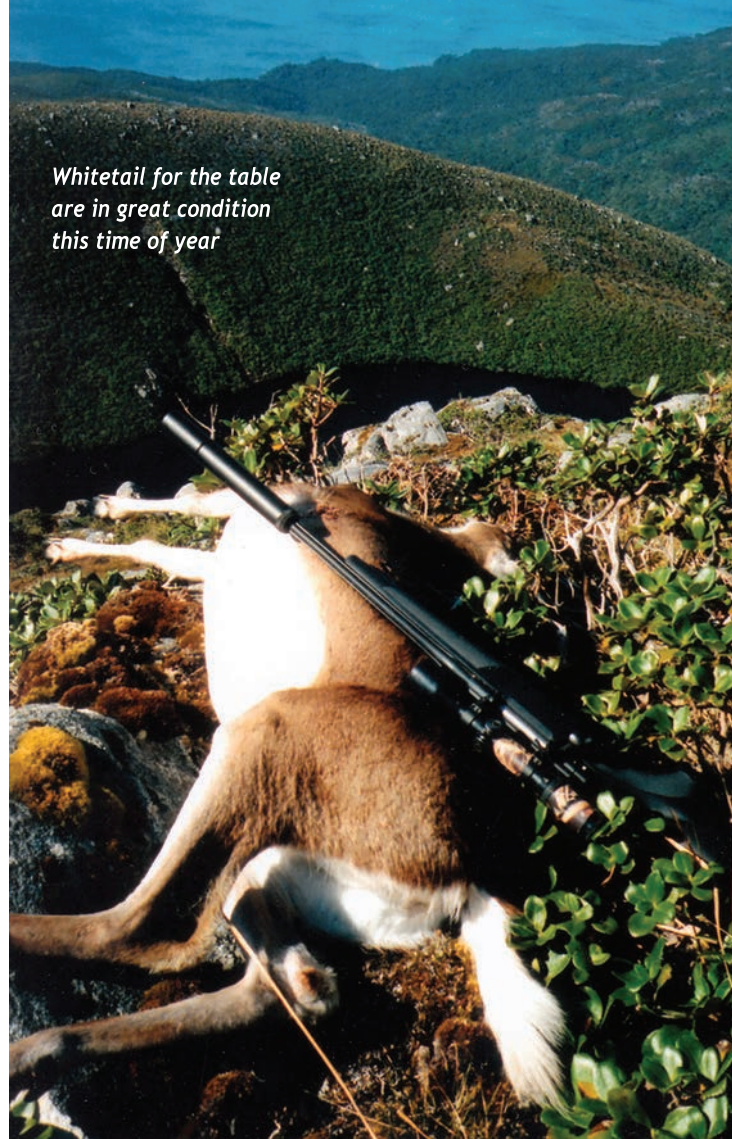
Just like any other deer the old boys start to rut earlier than the rest. As rule of thumb the rut is full on around ANZAC day – the 21st of April, at least for the original herds. I understand some of these newly formed herds rut a lot earlier. Fallow bucks move around their area a lot and sitting glassing a good face is very productive. They are aggressive animals and will not tolerate a lot of other males in the area. When hunting the open beech and pepper wood areas in the Blue Mountains, you always find lots of rutting pads and rubbed up pepper wood but no bucks. I have found to get these bucks you need to be sitting in an area with a good view well before first light, especially if you know their track back from the feed areas into the thick stuff. In the rut bucks have a habit of popping in and out of the thick scrub, so watching the edges of these areas can also be productive.

The Greenstone/Caples animals are very similar. Bucks move around a lot in the rut. Too many young bucks and only the odd big one are shot around the edge of the valley floor. The big boys seem to move a lot higher on to the benches and can often be found out on the tops and old slips. The Fallow buck's roar is a croak, like the sound of a chainsaw with its spark plug out.

Getting in close to a Fallow buck in the rut is not that easy as they have a habit of having doe's spread out all over the place.

WHITETAIL

Throughout most of this period the Whitetail bucks are finishing the antler growing period and then moving around checking out the whereabouts of the does and marking their territory. Their rut doesn't start till later, around the same time as the Fallow but runs well into June. Some big bucks are shot this time of year, but the trophy hunting doesn't start in earnest for another month. Meat animals are in good condition.



Whitetail for the table are in great condition this time of year

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SAMBAR

When hunting Sambar at this time of year you are likely to encounter stags that have not long been out of velvet, yet also others that are a month or so ahead or even behind! With Sambar there is never any certainty about what stage exactly the stags will be at, so it's really just a matter of getting out there and seeing what's about. Expect to see plenty in velvet though. It may be useful to check out any wallows that you know of to see if they are frequenting the area. During the day the Sambar will tend to lie up in their hiding spots or in areas with less pressure but will sometimes be observed feeding on smaller grass clearings, although typically only in the early or late parts of the day. Clearings surrounded in gorse or thick scrub will give the Sambar more security and they may be more likely to stay out feeding longer than in other open areas.

RUSA

Most Rusa stags will still be in velvet and will have a reddish-brown coat. The hinds will typically be more of a yellowish-brown. Rusa will continue to be found out on slips or in the bush tucked up in their hiding areas. The Rusa are notorious for their 'tunnels'. These can sometimes be located near to their feeding areas so that safe access and retreat is possible throughout the day. The tunnels allow the Rusa to be extremely well concealed from danger and most times can remain unseen even when the hunter is only a few meters away. As the stags are still in velvet, it would be a shame to shoot one but take a hind for a meat animal if you like. Hunt the early morning and late afternoon watching slips, clearings and anywhere there's grass. Be prepared for long shots.

One of our most secretive and difficult to hunt deer - a Rusa stag and a couple of hinds. Photo: Steve Smith



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CHAMOIS

During the latter part of April, bucks will start seeking out doe's in the lead up to the rut. They will tend to be high on the skyline overlooking and scenting either side of a ridge. Bucks will begin roaming the open tops in search for their female counterparts, and this can present opportunities to pick them up moving cross-country during the middle of the day (when they'd normally be bedded up). On several occasions during late April (early May) I have lured bucks in by clowning around in the tussock. They are very inquisitive and will come in closer to inspect whether you are mateable or not so long as you don't stand up or show your face! Their coat colourings will have darkened considerably as they grow into their winter coat. During late March their coat colour will be darkening with wisps of orange and grey on their shoulder and rump, and (for the bucks) a tinge of ginger under their belly. By late April (early May), they should be mostly black.

Make sure your maimai preparation is done well before April, not only so you don't disturb the Mallards, but also so you're ready for the roar!



TAHR

Personally I wouldn't bother too much with hunting for bull Tahr in March or April, as they're well and truly back up into the steep stuff moving cross-country in search for females leading up to their rut (June/July). Also, their impressive winter coats are still developing, so now is a good time to chase a pair of antlers!

WATERFOWL

Hopefully for those of you in areas where the Canada goose season is open you have been taking a heavy toll on them at a time when they are very vulnerable. As the geese experience more hunting pressure you will have to be more selective to the locations and weather conditions that you choose to hunt in. Also after more pressure the moon will come into play so for daytime hunting you should be planning your hunts around the new moon which for March is the 26th. The best time for a moonlight hunt will be around the weekend of the 14th/15th of March.

Many regions are holding special summer seasons for hunting Paradise Shelduck also, but be sure to check with your local Fish and Game office for the open areas, limits and other relevant regulations.

You will have your planning for the opening of the Duck season well under way by now with all the work on your mai mai done and everything else in order, right??? Well if not, time to get busy! We should all know opening is the 2nd of May, what will the tides be if you hunt tidal water? It will be a half moon, how will that affect you? If feeding your possie do you have a plan in place to do it with minimal disturbance if you want it to work well in the morning? Have you considered using an automatic feeder? A little planning and preparation now will go a long way to ensuring that the first weekend in May will be an enjoyable and memorable one!



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