



This is a great time of year to attain a bull tahr trophy, as the bulls will often be feeding on the freshest growth a lot lower down the slopes. In October/November they will be starting to lose the prominent manes they grew for the rut. They will now be bleached a very striking blonde colour, contrasting strongly with the almost black rear half of their bodies. Mount Cook Tahr country in November

The Hunting Calendar

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Outside of the roar, these are probably the two biggest months on the deer stalking calendar.

Why? Because the deer are on the move and making up for lost time (and condition) filling their bellies on spring growth. The lawns might start growing in September but in the mountains, spring generally starts in November. Deer will begin appearing on the flats, slips and clearings

and once the hinds/does drop their calves/fawns, there will be yearlings wandering around trying to figure out why they are suddenly on their own. Left to fend for themselves, they become easy targets for the hunter after a bit of tender meat. Just don't expect them to be at their fattest at this time of year, as they are at the bottom of the pecking order, food wise. For the meat hunter, this is a great time of year!



Red Deer

The stags will be well into their antler growing cycle by now and even the youngest animals will have some velvet up. In the open country, the stags will often be in mobs, according to their age groups. The hinds will be getting ready to drop; then dropping their offspring.

NORTHERN AND CENTRAL NORTH ISLAND

In the Hauhangaroa and similar bush areas, deer emerge from the steep gorges where they spend a lot of the winter to populate the easy flat country where new growth on wineberry and the like is coming



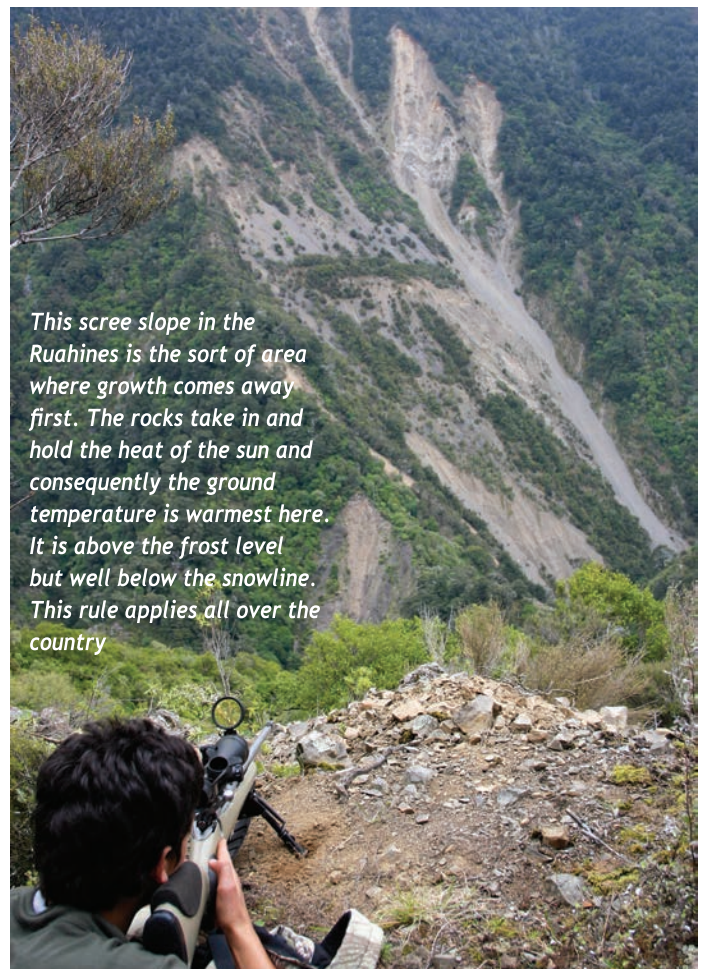
When the hinds start dropping their progeny, the yearlings will be alone and they are easy targets for the hunter after a bit of tender meat. Henry Yule with his first deer, a Sika yearling from the Kaweka high country

away. Clearings, bush roads and farm paddocks on the bush edge are where you'll pick up easy deer. Generally, the bush stags are found high up on the main range away from the hinds where they grow their velvet in peace and solitude. At times they won't be able to resist visiting that bush edge grass but it will usually only

be under the cover of darkness. Hinds will start fawning around the first week of November, with most fawning over by December.

Further south and east, the frosts are getting less frequent and the growth is starting to come away everywhere. The earliest places to move are always the slips and north facing slopes about mid-valley level, especially around the screes and rocky areas as they take in more heat during the day and are less frost prone. It all gets down to soil temperature - the valley floors are colder due to frosts and the higher tops are colder due to the fact that temperatures drop as altitude increases.

Somewhere above the frost level but below the snowline, the ground temperature will be warmest at this time of year. Into December, the river flats will start to push and by the end of the month, there will be fresh growth everywhere the sun reaches. The farm edges, especially in paddocks free of stock, will produce all year round.



This scree slope in the Ruahines is the sort of area where growth comes away first. The rocks take in and hold the heat of the sun and consequently the ground temperature is warmest here. It is above the frost level but well below the snowline. This rule applies all over the country

SOUTHERN NORTH ISLAND

The Tararuas and Ruahines have some great spring hunting spots and the bigger river flats can be good producers at this time. The problem is that they get a lot of attention from hunters (especially the Southern Tararuas as it is close to Wellington) and can be hit or miss for this reason.

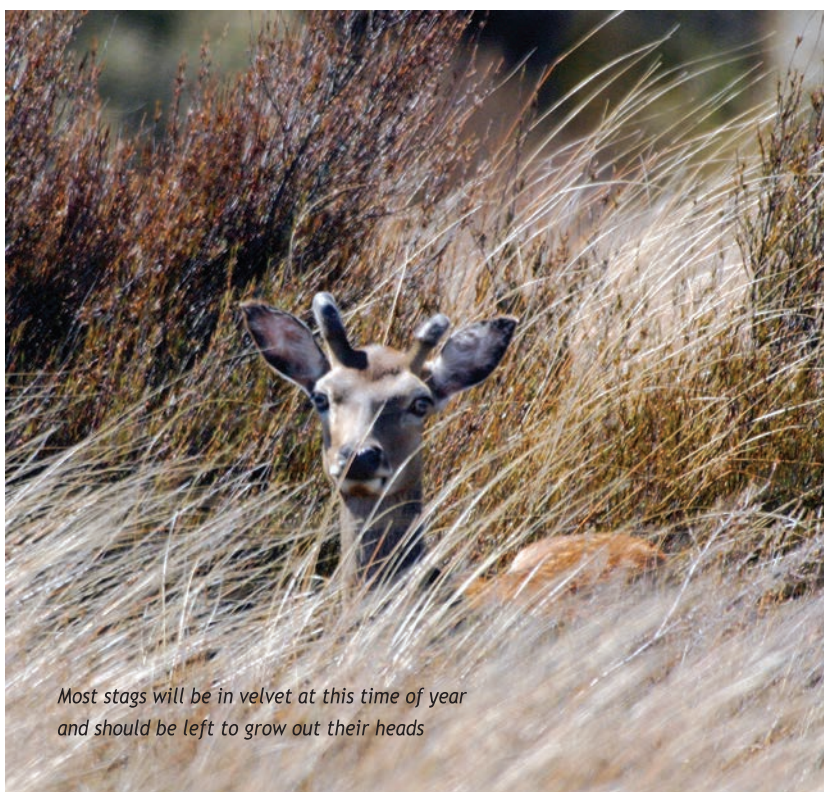
Here's a hint. Hunt the smaller or less well known creeks that have slips and small flats on them, where the deer might be a little less disturbed. Recent helicopter pressure will mean that these spots close to cover will often be more reliable as well. The Haurangis are predominantly bush covered and have less in the way of grassy river flats and slips. The Sutherlands Hut area between the north and south blocks with all its reverting farm land gets hunted pretty steadily at this time but continues to produce. The grass is a huge drawcard for bush dwelling deer who crave fresh spring growth.

There are a lot of bush edge hunting opportunities at the backs of farms surrounding all these ranges and they are best at this time of year if you are lucky enough to have access. Remember that spring starts earlier in the lower farm edge country and you should time your hunting accordingly. By December you should also start to see deer out on the tops, though later in December is better for this.

SOUTHERN ALPS

If you're hunting for stags in the open country, climb further up into the valley heads and cast your eyes across the north facing slopes of head basins and tussock terraces adjacent to scrub, bush and waterways. Pay particular attention to sheltered eddies tucked away from the wind. Stags (when left undisturbed) will tend to feed higher in elevation than hinds during this time of the year. Concentrate your efforts in that lush alpine belt between 1100-1400m asl.

Remember, you're only after a meat animal at this time of year and the stags are in velvet. Leave them to grow their antlers out and return in early to mid-February when their antlers are hardening up. Spring is a good time to identify potential trophies for the up-and-coming season.



Most stags will be in velvet at this time of year and should be left to grow out their heads

Initially, hinds will still be hanging out with last season's yearlings while also preparing for this season's newborns. They will tend to stay lower in the catchments, feeding in and around river flats, clearings and hard against the edges of slips or along bush fringes. They too, will opt for north facing warm slopes, sheltered from the wind generally between 600-1000m asl.

As November progresses into December, you will find yearlings doing stupid things, much like the youth of today. They can be found feeding in the middle of riverbeds, on obvious clearings and slips and way out in the open tussock hundreds of metres from bush cover right throughout the day.

DOWN SOUTH

Just about all of our deer are doing the same things at this time of year – it's not rocket science. All our animals have just come out of a comparatively mild winter, bar a few weeks. They are all looking for fresh tucker; the males for their quickly growing antlers and the girls to feed their offspring. This time of year is no time for trophies but with animals gaining weight, it's certainly a great time to secure meat for the freezer.

One of the best ways to do this is to hunt the fresh grass and follow the spring flush as it gains altitude. Just remember the price of venison is rising and the recovery people are going to be pushing the boundaries so the easy animals are going to be picked off early this season.

Sika

A lot of the mature Sika stags will have dropped their antlers by the start of November but there will still be plenty of younger animals carrying antlers through until December. A few spikers and first head animals will persist with antlers well into December.

Hinds will start to drop fawns in earnest from the last week of November and they disappear for a bit until the fawn is mobile enough to travel, which is only a week or so.

By the beginning of November, the lowland beech forest like that found in Clements Rd will see Sika feeding on the clearings, open

creek systems and bush/scrub fringes as spring arrives in the bush proper. The jelly fern on the clearings will be up about 20cm and while deer don't eat the fern, they do find other freshly growing tidbits coming away amongst it.

The higher the altitude, the later it is before spring growth arrives. As we said above with the Reds, the mid-valley faces and slips around rocks and screes from 800m asl move first, due to the ground temperature. In the Kaweka and Kaimanawa scrub country, the Sika's favourite food at this time of year is the 'asparagus' of the high country, mountain tutu, which comes away on the clay pans and screes. Look for deer doing the rounds of all the mountain 'tut' beds in the area, nipping off the new spears as they emerge.

If you're planning a hunt in the central North Island high country above 1000-1500m asl then it'll be getting on into December before you'll see much sign of growth.



The asparagus of the high country - mountain tutu. This plant is one of the Sika's favourite foods at this time of year, and they'll do the rounds of the beds every day, picking off the new spears as they emerge. The arrows point to some mountain tutu beds on this face

Fallow

The Fallow does drop their young at a similar time to Sika, while the bucks drop their antlers around the end of October onwards, depending on the altitude. Fallow are in good numbers in the Wanganui area but mainly on private land. There are also isolated populations building up in huntable numbers, also on private land throughout the NI, if you are 'in the know'.

With both these farm land based populations, spring makes less of a difference as the deer are predominantly grazing grass throughout the year. Finding a paddock/area that stock have not grazed makes more of a difference. Find the good grass and you will find the deer.

In areas with good numbers, like the Greenstone and Caples, the animals are flooding onto the valley floors but these areas are closed

to hunting in spring. This is a great time of year for the camera. The Blue Mountain Fallow are also on the move, poking around for the spring growth and they are generally more visible.

Whitetail

Most of the Whitetail bucks will have long since dropped their antlers. Some will have dropped in June and I would not trophy hunt them any later than mid-July. The Mainland herd bucks will often grow their new antlers high up in the open mountain basins, away from the does, in a life of solitude. I have hunted the does and yearlings for meat several times in the late spring, both on Stewart Island and in the Mainland herd and have been very successful, seeing good numbers of animals each time. They seem to lose their cunning a little at this time of year and it is a good time to hunt does to secure some meat.

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The little grassy gut on this face is a deer magnet in December once the growth really starts. The lone broadleaf is always checked out by the passing deer for any fresh leaf fall

Wapiti

Wapiti are going through the same changes as the Reds but in Fiordland you haven't got the farm land and big grass areas. You do have the slips and open tops and as the snow melts and the ground warms up (and the air does too) they like to push out onto the open areas at any opportunity. This is all weather dependent of course, and you'll obviously be taking only hinds or poor quality crossbred females, if hunting this area at this time of year.

Sambar

The majority of Sambar stags will be casting their antlers around November/December. However, there will be some stags that are exceptions to this rule and will hold their antlers right through this period. As the nights get warmer, Sambar will be even more active at night than their usual nocturnal behavior. For this reason and because of the recent spring growth, it will be productive to watch farm edges at first light. This is particularly so when the moon is at its darkest phase because it will limit their grazing area and they will be more likely to stay out for longer.

During the day, Sambar will tend to be bedded down on low ridges in pine blocks where they have a vantage point or tucked up in tight gorse or flax with an escape tunnel. Stalking these areas during the day will require patience and attention to detail as the Sambar will lie still with their senses on full alert.

They are actually easy to get close to in cover as they will stand still and wait to see what is coming, then explode in a rapid 'decamp' of the area. That doesn't mean they are easy to secure, however! They will let



you walk right on by if they think you haven't seen them and they're surprisingly quiet at getting about for such big animals.

In the Bay of Plenty bush type areas, Sambar can be observed feeding in the mornings until the day warms up and again in the evening, once the heat has gone from the afternoon sun. The best way to hunt them in this situation is to find a good lookout point and just sit and watch. On the eating front, Sambar generally rank pretty low, with a young yearling or weaner being the best eating animal.

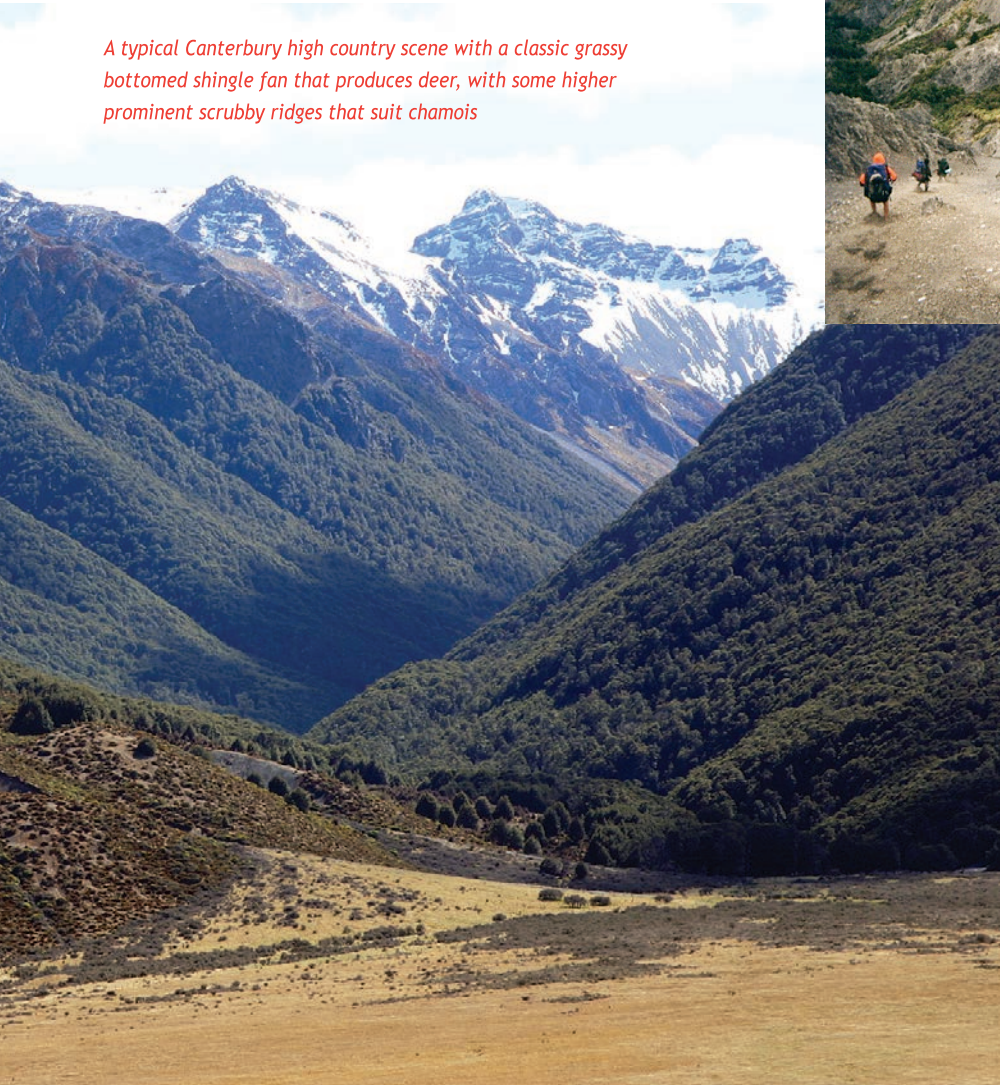
Rusa

Rusa stags will typically cast their antlers by the end of December, however like Sambar, some will not cast until later. Within close proximity to farm land, Rusa will be making the most of the recent spring growth. It follows then, that watching farm edges at this time of the year will be most productive if you are able to obtain access.

Being largely nocturnal animals, Rusa will be continually active through the warmer months under the cover of darkness. Dawn and dusk will be the best time to concentrate your efforts for this type of hunting. Those Rusa that are not near adjoining farm land will continue to browse mahoe and feed on slips.

It is not uncommon for them to visit slips at any time of the day so patience and persistence will eventually pay off. Bush stalking at this time of year is okay before the bush gets too dry underfoot. Some hunters think a Rusa is the hardest NZ trophy to attain so don't expect to do it easy. One thing is for certain - you won't get a trophy Rusa sitting at home and watching the telly!

A typical Canterbury high country scene with a classic grassy bottomed shingle fan that produces deer, with some higher prominent scrubby ridges that suit chamois



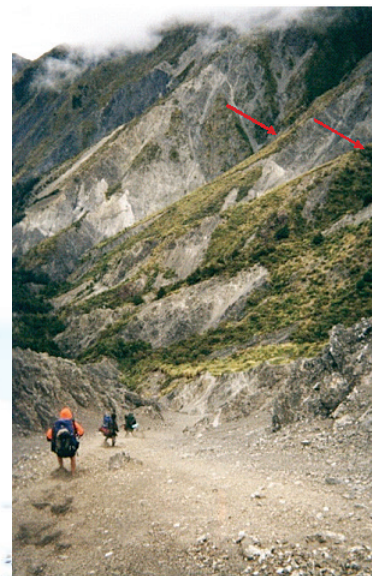
Chamois

Bucks will continue to remain solitary during this time of the year. Young bucks may still hang out with does but the mature bucks will most certainly be solo. Cast your eyes across rocky promontories, kinks in spurs where they can look down either side of the spur for danger and in that belt of monkey scrub, particularly on the West Coast.

They will generally bed down for the day between midmorning and midafternoon so get into your hunting area early, or else come back to it later in the afternoon when the bucks begin feeding again. Bucks can be a little unpredictable in terms of elevation preferences during this time but generally will be found between 1000-1700m asl.

Nannies, kids and juveniles tend to hang out in groups of at least three and sometimes more than ten. Look out for pockets of chamois clustered throughout the various gully heads of a catchment, where they will feed amongst steep faces with ledges to bed on. They too, will position themselves on a good vantage point.

During hot spells of weather, chamois will tend to bed down on cooler (south facing) slopes so as to avoid overheating. On scorching days, it pays to look into crags that still retain a bit of snow or ice, as they are often found in and around these snow chutes where they can cool



off. Again, I would tend to concentrate my glassing efforts between 1300-1600m asl and be looking on steep faces with multiple chutes where they can feed up and down. Chamois love feeding up the sides of slips, screes or tight tussock chutes.

*Great chamois country - arrows point to prominent spurs where bucks will often bed for the day and watch over their domain.
Photo: A. Hall, Oct 2002*

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Bull Tahr

This is without doubt the best time to obtain a mature bull in easily accessible, recoverable terrain. Unfortunately, they won't have that spectacular winter coat with the heavy mane and highlighted tips like they do in August/September. In November especially, bulls will be as low as 700-800m asl, feeding on the lush spring growth that begins at the valley floor and moves up slope as the temperature warms.

They are often found feeding in non-bluff habitat, foraging through scrub faces that contain young grasses and tussocks. Ideally, pick a face or head basin that receives the sun, has some scrub cover and is below or adjacent to a bluff system where the tahr will hole up during the day.

During the evenings, the bulls will move down slope (descending from as high as 1900m asl) to feed on the lower pastures. If you get up early enough, you will tend to find them feeding at these low levels but generally they begin their ascent into the bluffs by midmorning. So again, plan your hunt around first and last light. Generally speaking, this is the only time of the year where you will find bulls lower than nannies and juveniles, which tend to remain in the bluff habitat between 1500-1900m asl.



The bulls' coats at this time of the year are bleached blonde but not quite as thick as during the winter

Venison Recovery Outlook

After the respite of the last few years, it seems as though venison recovery is set to take off again. Prices are firming, with demand increasing and the exchange rate heading down.

Until last year, there was ostensibly only one processing plant operating seriously. Since then however, there are three more operating in the SI and rumours of possibly two more starting up, with around 20 choppers working. There is only one plant and five or so choppers operating in the NI at the moment. The SI is in for a hammering but the NI may be better off, initially anyway. If the venison price continues to rise, the economics will be there to cart the carcasses from all over the islands to the plants in operation.

At the time of writing, choppers are starting to work again in the Ruahines and the Tararuas to a lesser extent. The Raukumaras have the DoC subsidized recovery going on but other areas may escape the onslaught for a while. Everywhere (except for maybe the far north of the SI) is going to get some attention this season so factor that into your hunting plans. Thankfully, at least the Wapiti area is managed properly with only controlled recovery of the Reds and poorer quality Wapiti types - so long as the ratbags can be kept out!

On the plus side, the rules governing the shooting and processing of deer have changed considerably since the near demise of the industry in 2001. Now, an operator must become an approved supplier under New Zealand Food Safety Authority regulations and have an operations manual for his activities. Each animal taken must be individually tagged and have a corresponding GPS location on a track log of each flight. They must also be accompanied by poison declarations from all adjoining landowners. The real power in the current system lies with the processor. If a pilot has no outlet for the deer, then he is simply not in business.

The real problem for recreational hunters is that the money lies in the stag population, since they are generally in the open in the spring and summer and they have a heavier body weight. Then there is the added bonus of a cut of velvet to bump the price up. This means that the stags that we all want in the roar are getting disproportionately shot in the spring and summer.

To make matters worse, the silly spikers will also get shot before they have had the chance to get any sort of head on them. This has certainly been a factor in the reduction of herd quality over the last three or four decades. With the biggest and best stags having been creamed off by the choppers, there is no competition for hinds, allowing the riff-raff left to do the breeding. This is the opposite of Mother Nature's natural selection process that produced the big stags in the first place.

The problem is that DoC does not limit the numbers or control in any way the helicopters that can shoot



deer on public conservation land. No operator is prepared to leave a big stag that he sees in velvet because he knows the next chopper round the corner will shoot it. This may change with all concessions for venison recovery coming up for review next year. Until there are some limits on the number of operators and what can be shot, we will just get more of the 'boom and bust' that is bad for recreational hunting and indeed, for conservation.

UNBELIEVABLY - HERE WE GO AGAIN!

Waterfowl

During November/ December most hunters only think about waterfowling when a brood of ducklings is spotted as they consider the prospects for next duck season. But our shotguns should not be gathering dust during the late spring early summer period as there is still some good waterfowling to be had targeting the king of all waterfowl, the Canada goose. The adult birds have now dispersed to their breeding areas leaving groups of juvenile or 'sub adult' geese. These will congregate in small groups normally in quiet locations that do not get much disturbance near swamps or larger bodies of water. Most are 2 years old or less and without the guidance of their cautious



This time of year, geese will more often than not turn up in pairs, which makes for a very successful hunt!

elders, make for great hunting as they will decoy easily. The other habit that will make for better results for us hunters is the fact that although not breeding some of them will have paired up. This will mean that even if you only find a small group of geese, they will more than likely show up flying in pairs. This should provide ample hunting opportunities plus some good conditioned tender young birds for the table. Good luck!

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November 2008

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