



# BUSH HUNTING TACTICS FOR REDS AND SIKA DEER

## CAST ANTLERS

No 2 of a NEW SERIES BY MARTIN ASKES

**Finding a nice cast antler is almost like getting a trophy without shooting it. Some hunters prize them highly while others will have a quick look when they find one and toss it aside.**

I've heard of hunters shooting a stag in late winter only to find when approaching the dead animal that an antler has fallen off in the process!

I recall a story of a trophy hunter that lined up on a nice red stag after getting a good look that it was a shoot able stag. The animal walked around some scrub and thrashed a tree while the hunter waited for the chance to shoot. Next he came back into sight and it had cast one of his antlers! Bugger! Depending on how much of a purest you are, a taxidermist can easily attach an antler back onto your mounted trophy. Actually, they usually mount trophies for shipping overseas with removable antlers anyway.

If you are not worried about winning your local club trophy or other competitions, you can cut the skull back to greatly reduce the weight and even split the head into two. Something for you to consider when you are several days away in a remote Fiordland valley.

**1** I carry a small Silky saw with a fine tooth blade when hunting. It can cut the skull down quickly and easily. Even a small stag like this Sika has a heavy skull.

**2** A Silky saw can also split a whole animal in two length-wise, like this fat wild boar shot this year.

### When

Mature stags will cast their antlers in late winter with reds casting in August and September and sika following a few weeks later. The larger stags will cast first and some spikers and very young stags will hang onto their antlers for several more months. If you are after a stag with antlers still attached, don't leave it too late.

You can however, find them at any time of year with some areas having many more cast antlers than others.

**3** This sika antler was found as you see it in April 2009. It is a fresh cast from the previous winter and already you can see deer have chewed the tops considerably.

### Where to look

Most of the larger stags will be feeding very little when they cast (around August) as they are in their winter mode. They sit about for long periods in sheltered areas out of the wind with their appetites switched off. Stags conserve energy and hang around on the sunny sides of the hills (north facing) where the

canopy is often sparse and open allowing direct sunlight and warmth through. This is especially so for sika deer as they love the sun after a frosty morning. Open clay pans on warm sunny Manuka faces are a favourite place for them.

**4** Clearings like this are a prime place to find cast antlers. Facing north and protected from the wind there are often cast antlers about this general area.

I have only ever found one matching pair of cast antlers. They were from a red stag and I picked them up only a few metres apart on the same day. Generally, it is rare to find both cast antlers from the same animal, especially sika.

### Spring

Occasionally spring arrives in September, especially if you hunt low lying areas or warm weather arrives early. When this happens, spring growth begins and stags will switch on to "feed mode." They will leave their winter haunts and hit the grass wherever they can find it, often in dangerous places (for a deer that is.) If the weather cools down again and grass growth is shut down, stags will become very hungry and feed intensively on broadleaf or similar nutritious leaves wherever they can find them.

You will find their cast antlers almost anywhere, but clearings are still a better bet so keep your eyes open when approaching them.





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5 This small sika antler I picked up in spring had just been dropped close to an area with lots of broadleaf canopy. You can tell it is a sika because the brow tine branches off up a few centimetres from the base and angles upwards without the hooked end that reds have. It also has a strong raised "reinforcing ridge" on the main beam running down to the brow tine that is a typical sika characteristic.

**Antlers for food**

Deer will chew cast antlers until there is nothing left of them. It is believed that they seek the calcium and other minerals from the antlers. Wet weather softens the antlers and while some will take five years or more to be eaten away, a small sika antler can typically be

chewed down in a couple of seasons.

6 This very fresh antler that I picked up in the early spring already had its brow tine chewed down. Note that the brow tine comes off the beam very low down and at right angles showing it to be from a red stag.

7 This is an old 5-point red antler with most of the tines chewed down. This stag may have been a reasonable 10-point stag when he cast.

8 This is a small piece of sika antler about two or three seasons old. It still holds some information about the deer that it came off. Just by looking at the thickness you can judge the size

potential and get an estimate of his age when he cast (more on this later.)

9 This old piece of antler is from a red stag and has nearly been completely eaten by deer.

**How Old?**

When estimating the age of the deer from a cast antler you've picked up you've got to look at more than just the size. You might have a cast with just two points that may look like an up and coming animal but could be from a very old stag going backwards. Look at the pedicle where the antler broke off. The younger the animal, then the more antler base is



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convex and the older the animal then the more the base is flat or even concave.

- 10 See the base of this antler from a young sika stag. There is a "point" of antler where it broke off and a large "piece" of antler under the pedicle.
- 11 This sika is about 3-4 years old and has a flatter, only slightly convex base.
- 12 This cast is from an old sika stag at least 5-years of age. Note the flat base of the antler. Actually, I have spent 4 years chasing him since he arrived at his roaring area. I expect he is actually 7 or 8 years old and high time I nailed him!

#### Antler growth.

If a sika is a six pointer, unlike a red deer he WILL NOT grow into an eight pointer the following year. A young stag in his third year (with his first head after being a spiker or 4-pointer the year before) should throw a small eight point head if he is to be an eight point stag.

Just to confirm that I believed was I correct about this I discussed it with NZ Sika hunting icon Neil Philpot and Fred Bayer, well known trophy hunter from Rotorua, who have both farmed sika deer. They confirm that only the small eights grow into big eights!

In actual fact, once a sika reached his potential at about 4 or 5 years of age his antlers change very little from one year to the next, subject to the food supply.

See the picture of Fred's sika stag on Pg 16 of this article. For five years his antlers were almost exactly the same; within a couple of centimetres. Even the smaller inner-top and longer brow tine was exactly the same every year on the same side!

- 13 This tidy six point sika taken by Gary Krom will not grow into an eight pointer so take them if you can. If you are trophy hunting and you want to improve the stags in your area, take extra care to leave the small eight pointers.
  - 14 I picked up a cast antler from a very long 6-point sika every year for five consecutive years from almost the same spot and he hardly changed his size at all. Actually, even slight imperfections remained the same! I actually shot at him twice while bow hunting, once from less than two metres away! He was eventually shot by another hunter. Still, you can't win them all.
- Finding a good cast does not mean that the stag is in the same place during the roar. But generally speaking, he will be within a couple of grid squares on your map. It is however a great indication of what stags are in the general area that you are hunting. Keep your eye out for cast antlers, if nothing else they are handy to lift the billy off the fire and make good knife handles. You might even find a matching pair! 🐇

