

# BUSH HUNTING GUIDE... GAME TRAILS



## NEW SERIES BY MARTIN ASKES

These articles are designed to help you understand deer habits and behaviour so that you may gain more enjoyment from your hunting. They relate mainly to Red and Sika as they have been my main quarry over the last 30 years.

### GAME TRAILS

When you first start out hunting in the bush, the place might seem like a vast area of gullies and ridges that all looks very similar. Inside the bush there is deer sign here and there, some places more than others. To find a deer you start out wandering along the easiest routes looking for animals, keeping in mind that you have to find your way back to where you started from.

In fact, the bush is full of highways and paths, tracks and sign that can lead you to your deer, if you know how to read them. Called 'game trails,' these paths can be as easy to follow as a paved road or sometimes very hard indeed. Following them is a learned skill and following the right ones can take a bit of working out. Once you learn to read the various trails you can find deer much more easily, even a particular sex and type of deer.

I'll talk you through a few different trails and animal sign through photos that I took on a recent hunt.

- 1 This deeply formed game trail has been used by generations of deer as they move from one area to another as the seasons change. Despite being easy to follow the sign on it was old, you can tell by looking closely at the bank for grooves made by deer hooves. These types of trail, once you learn them, can be good to move from one area to another.

If you are after stags then you want to follow their trails. They are very different from hind trails because the hinds are still on their feeding routines while stags are constantly marking their territories and checking for hinds. Note that Red stags wander far and wide looking for hinds coming on heat which they round up and try and hold on to (harems). Sika spend more time marking a territory where they attempt to lure a hind. Sika stags will leave their territory and travel a fair distance in a day, following a hind in season. They will however, return to their territories soon after, usually the same day late in the afternoon.



1 Deep Trail

During the roar, stags will have fresh trails around their territories especially into their "core" area. When you find good trails converging you may be getting close. Remember the saying, "All roads lead to Rome."

Stag trails are marked with "pads" or "scrapes" and are scented up and used to attract hinds.

- 2 This is a Sika stag trail and is easily marked by the stag rub clearly seen on the central tree. It's a difficult approach because of the noisy beech tree leaves. The stags "core" area is about 100metres away and twice I have called him in when bow hunting just at the end of the photo. He is a reasonably big 6 pointer.
- 3 When you see sign like this with several broken trees in one spot that is OFF any trail then you are at or very close to the "core" area. See the broken tree, this sign is RED HOT and if you haven't spooked him, it's worth a return at first light for a roar.
- 4 This sika stag trail was a little hard to follow until I spotted this thrashed fern. Look closely how far the dead fronds have been cast! This was about 200 metres away from the "core" area of this stag.

I mention the "core" area of Sika stags often as it is these places you should look for within your hunting area. It's a bit like finding a big wallow in Red stag territory. The core areas are where the stag often rests, has multiple pads located and is close to where he intercepts hinds. Often it is close to a clearing and usually on a flat piece of ground. Tight cover such as manuka (if growing in the area) is often close by as well. Once found, they can be used year after year. If you hear a roar from the general area, heading for the "core" area often gets results.



2 Stag Trail



3 Good Stag Rubs

- 5 Even if the sign is very old, like this rub tree in Red stag territory, it still marks a stag trail. They use the same territories each year and if the stag is killed, another stag will soon take up residence. When stag hunting, follow their trails keeping a close eye on stag rubs of all ages. This area is very close to where a Red stag roars most every year.

- 6 This game trail is high up and close to a leading ridge. Often deer will use a trail just off the ridge because hunting pressure and human scent will put deer off from using the open ridges themselves. Note the hunter in front



4 Thrashed Fern



5 Old Rub Tree



**7** Velvet Stripping



**6** Blaze Hunter

wearing Blaze Orange.

When stalking with a mate give him some distance but keep him in sight so you can stop the second he stops. Keep an eye out behind too!

**7** This thin sapling is done during "velvet stripping" and is not on a game trail of any note. It has good height off the ground, usually indicating large antlers but does not mean it is done by the stag within this territory.

During the roar young stags will mark the smaller trees and can be tolerated by the master stag. Watch the trigger when a small stag steps out first! Often the big boy is just behind. Late in the roar you may also see small roar pads close to the main ones. This is an up and coming stag that ranks below the master.



**8** Deer Sign

**8** When you see droppings like these in a tight group the deer are stationary or moving very slowly. Logically, you should slow down too as you are close to an area deer are spending time at. This sign is from a Sika hind. The spot had substantial broadleaf cover and several deer had spent time in this area.

**9** When you see droppings like this of mixed ages you are on a trail frequently used by deer returning from a feeding area. Because it is scattered the deer are on the move. The area is open and a good place to harvest a hind very early in the day.

If you add together knowledge from deer sightings you will quickly build up a picture of the deer movements. In the area of this last photo we rarely encounter a deer in the evening but have taken several meat animals close by in the mornings. Remember, deer regularly move from feeding area to bedding areas that are very safe places where they hole up during most or part of the day.

**10** If you loose the trail you were following, the deer may have left it for a reason. Look around carefully. If you see a recent windfall, deer may be leaving the trail to feed on the newly open area of bush. The top of a large fallen tree is a good place to pick up the trail again.



**9** Scattered Sign



**10** Tree Fall



**11** Stag Clumped Sign

**11** This is Sika stag sign. It is clumped as the stag is off the grass, takes in less water and feeds less. The stag's body removes more moisture from his droppings so they clump up. This is not particularly fresh but tells you you're on his trail.

**12** This old sign is also from a Sika stag. Look closely how the individual pellets are merged and squashed together. Taken during the spring, this is stag was feeding up heavily before winter, most likely on grass.

**13** This trail is made by possums and not deer. Brushed smooth by their fur and dips under this branch.

**14** This old antler gauge is as obvious as a road sign that you are following a stag trail. There are many small clues like this as you follow his trail.

**15** This sign is from a Red hind. It is RED HOT FRESH. Notice it does not have the regular "pointed" end like Sika droppings. When I stood up from taking this photo my movements put up her just 20 metres away. Told you this was fresh!

Deer prints are excellent sign that can tell you a great deal of information about the animals you are following. I will devote a whole section on prints in a following article. Logically, once you've worked out the general area the deer you want are travelling to or from, you will encounter more by following the trails against the flow of animals. Travel slowly, look ahead, stop often.

**16** This is a fresh Sika stag print from a young animal. Note the pointed toes, weight forward. Don't get too wrapped up on the size of Sika prints. A well known Sika expert, Neil Philpot, once told me, "You're after a stag with big antlers, not big feet." A future article will focus on deer prints.

Learn how to follow the right trails; they can take you to the best hunting areas, unknown clearings and feed areas. They can avoid bluffs and tight areas and will usually follow the easiest country and show you the best route to take.

**17** Cody Williams would be one of the best hunters that I have seen when it comes to following game trails. Seen here with a big west coast stag from the South Island he shot recently.



**16** Sika Print



**12** Stag Droppings



**15** Fresh Red Sign



**13** Possum Run



**14** Deep Gauge



**17**