

BUSH HUNTING TACTICS

TRICKS WITH STAGS

TAP AND GO

NO. 13 OF A SERIES BY MARTIN ASKES

So far I've covered a lot of physical features and signs of what to look for when bush hunting Red or Sika deer. This time I'm going to write about a practical tip that has worked with Sika for me in the past. It's a bit different so you may not have heard about it before...

"Tap and Go"

This technique has got me a few Sika stags when all else has failed to produce the goods. It is a useful "weapon" to have locked away in your memory for particular conditions.

When to try it

I use it when I'm heading back to camp occasionally, when I have really finished stalking and when I am not following any cut tracks but still passing through stag territories that may have already been hunted without result. It appears to work best early or late in the day, when there is little wind, and can be good in dry conditions when stalking quietly is hard. Although, it can work at any time and in any conditions. I have had big stags running in to challenge me while doing this, even at 2pm in the afternoon!

If you absolutely know there is a dominate stag in the area you can try this on him at any time, especially in the peak of the rut.

What to do

Here's what you do. Pick up a good solid branch, about a "walking stick" size is perfect although a cast antler works best. Next you continue along, loudly tapping every handy branch, supple-jack vine and tree trunk as you go.

Now, this may sound like a strange thing to do, especially when in previous articles I have often talked about moving in absolute silence, but stay with me...

You do not stalk along with this method, just walk quickly but take care not to kick any tree roots or thump your feet as this is a very different type of sound that you do not want to be making.

Stop at least every hundred metres or so and listen carefully for a minute or two, then continue on as before, tapping away. Take extra care when crossing any side spurs or ridges as there is sometimes a stag waiting to intercept you.



I shot this big antlered Sika stag from just two metres away in tight pepperwood. He came into me at a run, smacking his antlers as he came, after I used the Tap-and-Go hunting method on him. I had to cut the Pepperwoods away for this photo. (Seen here with hunting mate, Paul McCormick)

Why?

What you are doing is mimicking a dominate stag, who will sometimes smack his antlers about on trees and vegetation to chase off another stag. This method only works with the dominate stag of the area but other stags will sometimes give you the territorial Hee-haw call. It appears to work best on Sika when the rut is peaking in mid April and can work when there is no roaring as well.

When you have stopped, listen for a deer rapidly approaching but also listen very carefully for the quiet, high-pitched mewing sound of a stag. When you hear it, he is very close and relatively undisturbed.

What to do next

There are several things you can do next but the least productive is to try and quietly sneak towards the stag. They absolutely hate it and he will be on full alert, ears up, eyes staring, so unless the path ahead is totally free of any leaves and debris, resist the temptation to sneak straight towards him.

If you smack the trees again and he does not come immediately in for a look then you will need a change of plan. Mewing back at him can be a good move. Have patience and wait.

Otherwise you can take the more aggressive approach and Single Call at him, the louder the better. But if there is a hind with him, she will often leave and the stag will follow, even if you are using an electronic caller playing an actual recording of a deer. It may be possible that the hinds recognise every deer in their home range by their sound and your sound will be foreign to them. However, a stag will wander much further than a hind and will encounter many different stags that he is not used to and so will not get spooked by your call.

Take your time and don't move too much, you have found a stag, there is no need to walk for miles to try and find another one. If the deer does not show himself within ten minutes and you are with your mate, and you trust he is not going to accidentally shoot you, one of you can move back a hundred metres or so, calling as you go. This can bring the stag forward, especially if he is worked up and calls back to you.

When Sika stags are using their antlers to smack the trees to create a real racket they are trying to make themselves sound like they have a big, dominate set of antlers, which sometimes they have!

When a stag rushes at you for the first time, smacking his antlers as he comes in, it can be a pretty hair-raising experience. It will sound just like your noisy mate crashing through thick bush, snapping every branch as he goes through. I have even had hunters tell me how they heard someone else crashing along in the bush and yelled out to them, only to have "them" go quiet and disappear.

I would have a stag run in to me doing this, on average, once per roar, occasionally twice, if I use the Tap-and-Go method a few times. That may not sound like very often, but remember, these are the older, more cunning animals and if you decide to shoot, make sure you can take it home.

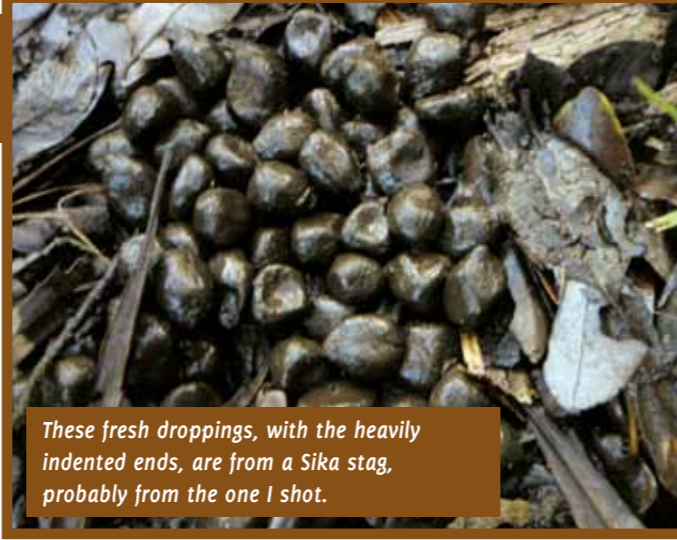
I once had the same stag (a nice 6-pointer) run in on me while I was using the Tap-and-Go method for three years running! I shot at him twice when I was using my bow but still didn't get him, as he was in heavy Manuka and getting a clear shot was very tricky. He would never come in to a roar but using the Tap-and-Go method he would bolt straight in at me like a freight train, also smacking his antlers.



A small but solid 8-point Sika stag. Note that I have cut the skull back for the carry with my Silky saw.



A big fresh Sika pad is always exciting to find. Unfortunately, the size of the pad does not necessarily reflect the size of his antlers.



These fresh droppings, with the heavily indented ends, are from a Sika stag, probably from the one I shot.

See how the rear print lags behind the front one showing this Sika to be an old animal. The "sway" from side-to-side shows he is in good condition and he was.



Remember...

There is one more thing you must know when a stag runs towards you.

Now, remember, he is intent on finding you to chase you away and when he stops, it is usually just to listen for your location so he can continue on. This is another time when making a bit of noise can help you. Just move your feet slightly when you hear him coming and he will adjust his course to lock-in on your position and head straight at you. Otherwise, he may run straight past you and when he stops to listen, he will be in a bad place and may cut your scent trail or wind you. Make it easy for him to find you and he will come right up to a couple of metres away or less! Be ready to shoot as they will run off even faster after eye-balling you at two metres or less.

This technique also works well on Red deer as I have had stags come in using it and even roar when I've been track cutting with a machete. Reds just love to smash trees with their antlers and making a racket with a stick can really get them worked up.

I once had a scrub-cutting contract clearing tall Kanuka bush off the Napier-Taihape road, on a block that bordered the State Forest. Often Red stags would roar back at me to the sound of my chainsaw and the louder the better. It made it hard to focus on work when a Red stag is bellowing out in the distance.

A Sika stag hunt

It was May 2010 and late in the day when I was crossing an area I knew to hold an old Sika stag and I was thinking about how to have a go at him. I had tried using fake pads on him and scented them up from the stag next door. Although this really revved him up a couple of days ago, I never got a clear view of him and would probably not get another chance for the year. He is a stag that turns

up in April, from his feed area somewhere, and is gone by about the end of May.

It was this same location, four years earlier, where I had spotted two other hunters in the open bush and before I yelled out to them I spied this Sika stag about 40 metres behind, following them like a dog! It was not safe to shoot (without giving the two hunters one hell of a fright!) but he looked like a small eight-pointer anyway and would be best left for a few years.

So here I was, about to have another try to nail one very cunning old Sika stag, hopefully with a nice big "hat-rack".



The force required for a stag to rip a gauge into the bark of a solid beech tree must be enormous. It's lucky they don't attack people (often!).



Have no fear. You can give a full volume Sika roar at very close range to a Sika stag and he will not take flight.



An old cast antler is perfect for the Tap-and-go method. Otherwise, just use a heavy branch.

I had just found an old cast antler and so decided to try the Tap-and-Go method - perfect thing for it.

After tapping away and travelling about a hundred metres I had just stopped for the second time and I thought I heard the faintest stag mewing sound. I thought it may be a bird, it was so hard to hear, but it was worth replying to anyway so I let out a single call and then strained the ears. Nothing.

Now, I have come to learn that if you think you heard a deer you probably did, so I smacked a few more trees and then stopped again to listen.

Then, right there in front of me, was a very big and very fresh Sika scrape.

"Where are you, you bugger?!"

I single-called again with no response so decided to sit a while and listen. I had been there for about five minutes and thought I would take a photo of the fresh scrap and so pulled the digital camera out and clicked off a couple of pics.

I then flicked through a few earlier photos of his other sign when the strangest thing happened. The deer replied to the tiny "bleeps" of the

camera! A few more "bleeps" and the stag mewed out again and best of all, he was close, real close!

For several minutes he hadn't moved so I hit the button on my new "camera-caller" and then he magically appeared out from behind a tree at less than 20 metres!

That was the end to a very old Sika stag. His jaw showed him to be at least 10 years or more but unfortunately his antlers were about the same size as four years previously.

Sika can be very curious at times, one of the reasons that they are such fun to hunt. 🐾



The antlers of this stag I shot in May 2010 had not grown any bigger since I last saw him four years earlier. From his jaw he was at least 10 years old.



Large hoof and small antlers. The size of the hoof does not always reflect antler size as was the case with this old Sika stag.



Two Sika seen here in summer coats. If you are after meat, do your bit for game management, leave the young stag (behind) and take the hind (in front).

If you want to catch up with some of my earlier articles in the Bush Hunting Series go to our website:

www.nzoutdoor.co.nz