

BUSH HUNTING TACTICS

SIKA STAGS

WHERE DO THEY GO?

Everyone should know that deer move about with the seasons but new technology available to us today has begun to reveal so much more information than ever before. With the use of radio tracking collars and hidden trail cameras some of their habits, particularly those of Sika stags, has been quite fascinating.

I'm going to split the stags into two groups because each behaves very differently. The young stags with their first or second heads (after being a spiker) as compared to the older stags that have all sorts of antlers but are older than three years of age.



Just a point here on the young stags; I believe the first or second head of a Sika is a good mini-representation of how they will look when older. In other words, a small 8-pointer will grow up to be a larger 8-pointer and a small six will grow up to be a larger six and so on. ¹ Not the case with Waps or Reds though.

The radio tracking study by Cam Speedy on Poronui Station has already shown us that the older stags that have been feeding up in the summer start to leave the area at around the middle of March.

By the 21st March this year the older stags were all gone from their feed areas.

Remember this date, because if you are after a stag on the tussock tops or out in the open feeding you really need to be hunting during the first two or three weeks of March. Watch out also for any that may still be in velvet at this time of year.

The study has shown us that the young stags don't go far but these older stags can travel for miles! One was recorded travelling for 12 kms but another left the 15 km search area only to return back in June with the rest of them.

The study by Allan Jackson on deer jaws has shown that a trophy stag can come from almost anywhere from within the entire Sika range, and this is most likely why.

The stags travel for miles to their rutting areas because the hinds do not.

Hinds live in a comparatively small area, often just a single grid square or two on your map,² so nature has a way of ensuring the best stags do the mating and giving them the urge to travel is one way of doing it.

Next year the study will show us if the same (surviving) stags will go back to the same places to rut. I'm betting they will, or very close to it.

When the mature stags arrive at their rutting grounds from mid March to the first week in April a very interesting thing happens.

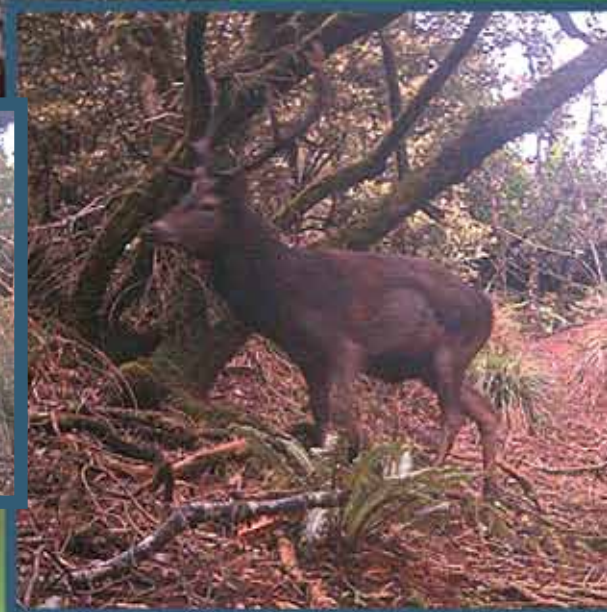


This is just one of ten different Sika stags that visited this one wallow in March during daylight hours. Photos courtesy Allan Foot.

< I shot a Sika stag at this nice Sika stag wallow in 2009.



June is when the trail-cams away from the wallows pick up Sika stags travelling back to their feeding grounds. There is just a single picture or two and they are not seen in that spot for the rest of the year. Below are two Sika stags on the move in early June.



Now, this has only come-to-light from watching hours and hours of trail-cam footage collected over the years by Allan Foot of AJ Productions (thanks for your patience Allan!) and going over hundreds of still photos. This was when the jig-saw puzzle started to be put together. (Plus I managed to corner the Sika-man Neil Philpott for a week on a fishing trip and squeezed as much information out of him as I could!)

Allan has found that the best place to film stags with the trail-cams appeared to be at their wallows. Now, I know Sika are pretty clean animals and they don't wallow like a Red stag but just stay with me here.

It now looks like every single stag in each watershed will visit the same wallow at this time, just before the rut starts.

Just how many different stags can visit a single wallow in this short time? Well, it looks like at least ten - we lost count while watching many hours of footage! More visit during the night as we can see the muddy ground is moved the next morning.

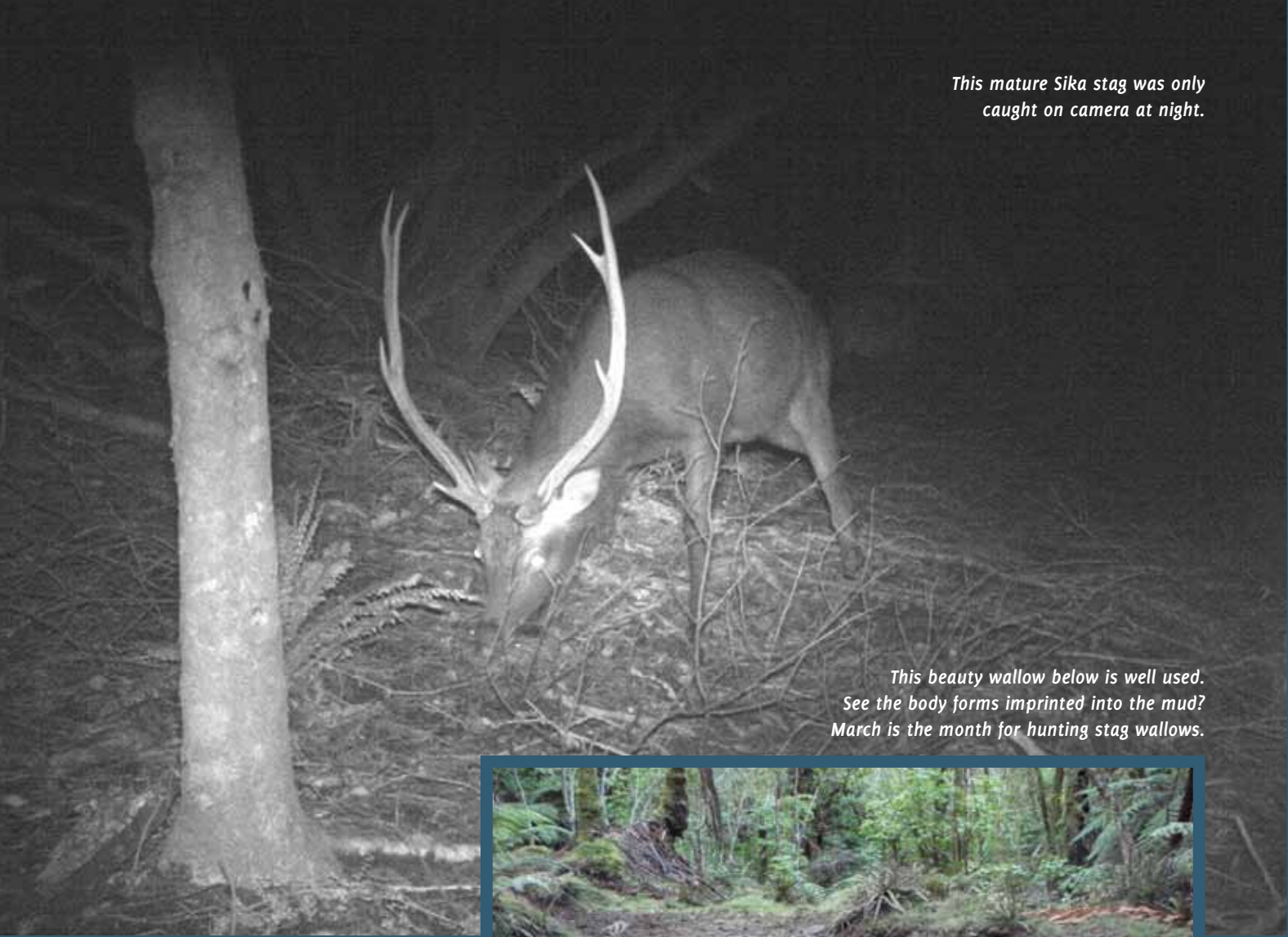
You have to remember that other things can trigger off the cameras such as birds, spiders,

waving branches, bright sunlight not to mention possums, rats and so on. So there was lots of footage to wade through.

These wallows are a place for stags only.

Hinds are not interested in them at all but stags certainly are! They all go through the same ritual as well when at the wallows. Only an occasional hind wanders through but they don't pay too much attention.

This mature Sika stag was only caught on camera at night.



This beauty wallow below is well used. See the body forms imprinted into the mud? March is the month for hunting stag wallows.



The stags sit down and rub their necks and faces on the ground, leaving plenty of their scent behind.

It does appear that not only do the older stags have their wallows but the younger stags have their separate wallows as well.

The good thing from a hunting point-of-view is that the biggest stag visits the wallow several times and the closer to the end of March the more often they are used.

I have noticed that none of the stags have spikers with them. This is very interesting on its own. Not just because they may be easier to get without their spikers or “watchdogs” walking out in front first, but because there is a period in early April when the stags are looking for spikers. Would the spiker-call work on bringing in those old stags to the sharp end of your rifle? It’s got to be worth a try.

During the main roar period over April and May the wallows are rarely used. The stags are now busy marking up their individual territories, doing their rounds and avoiding predators (hunters) like you and me.

In winter the stags are out on small, sheltered clearings like this one. This is a young Sika stag, probably with his first head.



Trail cam photos show that as the roar goes on the night time activity increases sharply.

This may be due to hunting pressure but as soon as June arrives, night time activity almost completely stops. June is also when most,

but not all stags leave to return to their feeding grounds where they came from.

Just where that area is in your particular hunting ground – this is something you will need to work out. It’s the same place as where they feed-up before the roar. Somewhere with good clearings (crops?) or a concentration of Broadleaf maybe?

I would say, (not all, because some stags will stay to roar right through the rest of winter) that there is the odd trophy stag thrown in there too. Why don’t they all go to-and-from these great feeding areas like Poronui? I think the answer lies with the humble spiker.

You see, when his mum kicks him out of the family group to have her next fawn, unlike the females, he is not allowed back.³

So what does a young male do when he has left school and mum kicks him out? He does the big OE, or in the spiker's case, goes off for a big wander.

Often he gets shot wandering around in the middle of the day where he shouldn't be, but if he can survive he'll end up in a new territory and maybe meet up with an older stag that will teach him the ropes.

The stags that stay appear to have reasonable feed areas within their territory. You know the place? Manuka (for warmth) and grass (for food) tucked out of the wind.

June and into July is a feed-up time for stags before winter really sets in.

By the time August arrives deer are into slow-down mode when their metabolism slows down and they hang around those sheltered clearings and warmer spots up away from the valley floor. They can be hard to find as they often group up with other stags and don't travel far. Clay pans in the sun after a good frost can often produce stags.

When they cast their antlers around September they go through more physiological changes and it can have some strange effects on the Sika stag. They can mope about for a time, even losing their fear of man. As a general rule, the big boys cast first.

When the spring growth kicks in the deer switch onto feeding mode again. This can be as late as November depending on the altitude and the season. Those after meat will know to hunt the grass as the hinds need it for milk production and the stags need it for antler growth, although I hope you choose carefully so you don't shoot my next year's trophy! It is widely believed that the switch to a grass diet is essential for flushing out toxins from a winter leaf diet. Anyway, that's where they are, then as summer progresses they gradually change back to a mixed diet of broadleaf, leaf-fall and so on as they move back into the bush to safer places.

I don't know about you, but the more I find out about these fascinating animals the more I realise that there is so much to learn.

Key footnotes by Cam Speedy:

- ¹ Head size of a young stag has limited bearing on adult trophy potential. Very small spikers or small first head stags can grow into very big antlered adults later in life.
Be careful what you shoot!
- ² Mavis Davidson's data shows Sika hinds have an average home range of 1.7km with a maximum of 6km so maybe 2 - 4 grid squares is more accurate.
- ³ Knobblers that leave Mum when she is in the maternity ward often return for their next winter. It seems that the bond breaks up towards 2 years of age (for their OE) and so you can get groups of young stags aged 1+ to 2+ or even 3+ age classes together.



By the end of April the wallows show little use.



This Sika stag arrived in April and is on the move and left the area at the end of May.

If you want to read more on hunting wallows or want to catch up with some of my earlier articles in the Bush Hunting Series go to our website: www.nzoutdoor.co.nz