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The Hunting Calendar

The middle of winter can be either feast or famine for the hunter, depending on what species you're after. In general, the metabolisms of all deer species will have slowed right down and they'll be in survival mode

RED DEER

This can be a lean time of year in many places in both islands - unless you are a pig or duck hunter! The deer are in 'go slow' mode and they have yarded up for the winter. The key places to hunt at this time of year are the mid-level, northerly facing slopes. They get the most sun; they are sheltered from the southerlies and are high enough off the valley floor not to hold the cold air. Look for sunny, sheltered little gully heads with plenty of feed. Broadleaf is a favourite food at this time of year.

Don't be afraid to climb reasonably high. Some of my best success at this time of year has been high up in the goblin forest with snow lying

around, where the deer are grazing on wind-blown leaves and branches. When you see a lot of sign, slow right down. Deer don't move far at this time of year and they will often be close by. Always keep an eye on the sunny slip faces at any time of day. Deer will often move out on these to browse and warm up - particularly after a spell of colder weather.

In the Tararua and Ruahine, look for those sunny sheltered slopes in any river valley. In the Rimutaka, there is quite a bit of open country in the heads of the side creeks running off the main range and these can be good spots to hunt. Make sure you are hunting sunny, north facing creek heads. In the Haurangi, there is plenty of good bush hunting and the climate is often a bit milder and drier than the Tararua. The regenerating open country between the two blocks can produce the odd deer off the scrubby faces but you will be sharing this country with a few pig hunters.

Meanwhile, down on the farm in the Wairarapa and Wanganui hinterland, things are pretty much business as usual. Hunt the warmer faces but also focus on the crops and paddocks without stock if you have access to them.

In the Southern Alps once winter has really set in, deer will have found their preferred area that provides the goods for them to ride out the winter. During June/July/August they tend to become quite conservative and spend a lot of time feeding and maintaining condition.

If you're hunting mountain terrain, the snow can actually be an advantage as it tends to make tracking deer easier.

Bush stalking can be pretty quiet underfoot if the snow is wet and slushy - but not if there's been a frost! If you come onto fresh sign, it generally means you're not far away. Stags tend to move away from the hinds from May onwards and form bachelor groups. This is particularly noticeable in the open country but it isn't necessarily the case in dense bush. Waro will have an effect on this, of course.



Crop paddocks are a stag magnet in winter, especially if they don't have to share them with other stock

SIKA

The next couple of months are the hard times for hunting Sika. The weather plays a large part as it's often cold, wet and miserable at the weekend when you have time to venture out! In beech forest, Sika conserve energy by moving little and lying up in bad weather under logs and large trees. They eat predominantly windfall broadleaf and some small beech seedlings and pepperwood over winter. A fallen beech tree brings down a lot of good tucker and over the next few weeks, the deer will eat all the leaves they can reach. They like astelia too - those flax-like plants that grow off beech trees. I've heard that astelia is also called 'widow maker' because if one hits you when it falls out of a tree - you're a goner. They get waterlogged after rain and that's when they drop.

In the scrub country, the deer's diet is largely the same; predominantly fallen leaves from broadleaf and unfortunate seedlings. They also chew the common flax or harakeke. A fine frosty spell will see a few Sika out in the open on the clay pans, catching a few rays in the mornings



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but they tend not to wander far from the bush edge. Hunting will be hard now but there's always the odd animal about. Stags that have access to grass or crops in shut-up paddocks will happily jump the fence now but the hinds largely don't move from their home range all year round.



On a frosty winter morning, Sika can be found in the sun, just like us!



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RUSA

This is the rut for Rusa deer so it's a great time to have a go at them. Rusa deer are one of the hardest of all our deer species to hunt for a trophy class stag – you'll earn and appreciate it when it happens.

Although you will still find the odd animal out on slips, most will be in the dense cover during this time and they will be more likely to seek warm sunny spots within the bush rather than venturing out into the open. Try to find areas with high activity and either carefully stalk your way in to them or sit back and wait. Again, be sure to visit spots that are going to catch the sun, as the Rusa will be in or around these areas. Watching slips and clearings where hinds are seen is a good place to start. Patience is required and long shots are sometimes needed to shoot across gullies.

Rusa stags are vocal during the rut but don't roar as often as Red or Sika. If you are lucky enough to hear one, then your best bet may be to try and pin-point it and carefully stalk your way in. Be aware that there will be plenty of other animals around and this will be a real test of your bush stalking skills. The animals are out there; you just have to do your ground work to find them.

Its Rusa rut time, one of the most difficult species of which to obtain a trophy. Photo Steve Smith



SAMBAR

This is also the rut for these large secretive animals and it's a good time to target a trophy animal. Having put on plenty of condition prior to the rut, most mature stags will stick close to thick cover throughout their rutting period. This not only makes them harder to hunt but also makes the younger stags more vulnerable, so try to choose carefully if you are after something decent. They don't roar as such, though they have been known to make some quiet noises. This period is considered the peak of the Sambar rut but of course it will vary depending on the different herds and types of areas where the deer are concentrated.

It is considered that areas with high feed will mean that Sambar will put on condition faster and therefore rut earlier than those areas with less feed. The same can be said for more dominant stags within their bachelor groups getting more of a chance at the better feed. As with hunting Sambar at any time of the year, your best chance is to sit and wait. And as with any species in the rut, if you can find hinds, then you know there will be stags nearby.

If you have done your research, then you may have found some areas where the stags are passing through, or maybe even a wallow or scrape. Try to find where the animals are entering an area, as they will usually follow a similar path. Plan your hunt and think about how you are going to approach your intended hunting area. The further away you can sit back and watch, the less chance you will have of being busted. Patience is the key with these elusive animals.

FALLOW

The rut is well gone now and the bucks will be back in their male groups. They'll be located where the feed is - in the same warm, largely north facing areas as for the other species. You'll see less of them on the valley floors where Jack Frost has burnt off all the grass and the temperature is lower. A good place to find deer in the winter is in and around the low scrub belt where the frost doesn't reach the grass underneath. Winter in the Greenstone and Caples brings snow, but if you can withstand the cold there is still good hunting to be had. The weight of the snow brings branches down lower in the trees and the deer can reach feed that isn't available to them at other times of the year.



Winter is also a great time for pigs. Willie with his first boar

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WHITETAIL

The bucks will be casting their antlers now. They have the longest growing season in velvet of all our deer, yet they have the smallest set of antlers. Harvest the females (does) for meat now, until March.

WAPITI

By now, the big snowfalls will have driven the animals off the tops. They'll largely be living in the valleys, feeding on what five finger and other palatables they can find. Snow damaged and windfall trees and branches also form a large part of their diet. The slips lower in the valleys are a great place to find animals. It is amazing how much snow a Wapiti will tolerate, and will often still be seen in the alpine scrub at the head of the valleys. The 'land of shadows' is a cold place to be at this time of year, where the sun doesn't make it at all to large areas of the valley floor.

TAHR

Come late July/early August, mature bulls will start distancing themselves from nannies and juveniles. The bulls will move back into bull territory, which typically involves a reasonable climb into cold, snowy and often icy conditions for the hunter. Bull coats will be starting to thicken up and display blonde tips and by late August/early September, they should have an almost striped mane.

Hunting elevations will vary depending on weather, catchment type and hunting pressure but as a general rule, concentrate in the 1500-1800m band. On particularly hot sunny days, glass those cooler south facing slopes as tahr also can experience overheating.

This is refrigerator time and you need to be well kitted out to seriously hunt tahr this time of year. Snow and ice are a given and your alpine skills can be really put to the test. Fly camping during July and August isn't for those who feel the cold!

CHAMOIS

While studying at Lincoln, I did a field study on chamois in a specific area in the Canterbury high country and I GPS marked every chamois that I'd either observed or shot (and those of hunting mates) over the past five years of hunting in the area. I did this for all seasons and then



Now is upland game time. Here are a very happy bunch of school kids on a Fish&Game organised junior day at a pheasant preserve. Thanks to Glencoe Station

proceeded to test a conceptual model which attempted to predict where chamois preferred to hang out at different seasons. I found that in winter, the majority of chamois were observed or shot on south facing slopes amongst or adjacent to scrub or sparse vegetation cover.

I overlaid these GPS points onto a 2D map of vegetation layers and did a whole lot of GIS related calculations based on their preferred habitat using information from articles and books about chamois in New Zealand. I was able to determine how true my conceptual model was, and without going into too much detail, it appeared to represent what chamois actually did in reality (about 78% true). Perhaps I will share the study in more detail at a later date but to get back to the point, I believe that there are a couple of reasons why chamois were found on the south facing slopes:

- Chamois are very well insulated (they come from central Europe which has a consistently cold climate – as noted in Lentle & Saxton’s book ‘Alpine Hunting in New Zealand’)
- The majority of chamois observations had taken place on a fine winter’s day – which may have contributed to the animals overheating. Particularly on sunny, still days, there was a distinct trend of animals seen or shot on south facing slopes.

WATERFOWL

For those regions with duck season still open, it is time to take advantage of the climatic changes that can increase our chances of success. Heavy rain and surface water will provide good hunting, especially combined with strong winds. Ducks will break from their normal patterns and move from safe refuges to take advantage of the wealth of food that becomes available. For duck hunters in drier areas, finding places where ducks are loafing during the day will provide early morning hunting and feeding out grain will still provide results for evening hunting. Be sure to refer to the moon chart from last issue for best times to go hunting Mallards in the evenings.

UPLAND

This is the time of year to really put the time in over your Pointer or Spaniel (OK, OK – or your Labrador!) Ducks are coming to a close in North Island regions but you’ve still got two months left to go on the pheasants and quail. 🐾

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