



The Hunting Calendar

Scrub and clay pan country is often warmer at this time of year than big bush as more sun gets to the ground. Photo Shane Hall

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Feed is what drives animals at this time of year as their metabolism begins to pick up before the growth has begun. These two months are the last of the winter in most places but only the warmest country will be showing any signs of spring by late October. Don't expect to find lush growth on the clearings and slips just yet!

RED DEER

In most places, the stags will have dropped their antlers so trophies are off until late February. The hinds are still a fair way off dropping their fawns and will still have yearlings and spikers in tow.

September and October can be funny months to hunt. The grass is growing on the lawns but growth is still one to two months away in the hills. For September, hunt as you would for winter ie the mid-level, sheltered sunny slopes. Traditionally, I have found September

to be a shocking month weatherwise. It is often cold, wet and windy... lovely.

I have noticed a bit of an anomaly though; in that I have often observed and shot Red stags feeding out on river flats at this time of year. I can only assume that they are hungry and their greater body size enables them to cope better with the colder temperatures on the valley floor. This is an exception to the rule on where to find stags but it has happened enough for me to notice it. It could be a last chance for a head in early September before the stags throw their antlers.

October can be a bit of 'all sorts' depending on where you are hunting. In the Tararuas and Ruahines, there is little or no growth lower in the valleys until the end of the month. This of course, is dependent on the season. Out on the fringes, the growth will start sooner and if it is a warm spring, then start to hunt the farm edge country at the beginning of October.

The same applies to some of the reverting country in the Haurangis, which is also at lower altitude. In the farm country of Wanganui and the Wairarapa, the animals will still be favouring the sheltered sunny faces/paddocks in September and by October, the grass growth will be full on. Deer in this sort of country get a real head start on their bush cousins because of the quality of feed available - and for the fact that they get to enjoy it for longer.

SOUTHERN ALPS

The upper tributaries of most Southern Alps catchments are typically the preferred feeding grounds for deer during spring. However, this will alter depending on the level of hunting pressure (recreational and commercial). Deer will be eager to move out of the lower valleys and bush (which still tends to hold the cold, sunken air) seeking warm faces with new spring growth.

Again, be selective about how you hunt open country like Arthurs Pass given the level of WARO in the area. I would hunt areas with plenty of cover, warm, north-facing slopes, clearings, slips and lush, grassy river terraces.

If there's been WARO in the area, the deer will tend to hug that bushline until very last light. If you're really keen to hunt the tops, strategically place your camp in a position so that you can hunt the hot spots right on last light. That way, you only have a 20-30 minute walk back to camp by head torch.

If the open tops aren't producing the goods, drop down into hanging basins (typically the last fingers of bush and scrub before the headwater) and scout the side creeks and fingers of cover for sign. If you find fresh marks, re-evaluate your hunt and perhaps relocate camp.

Stags will be in velvet, so if you're after a trophy, you're better off to shoo them towards cover and return to the area in mid-February when they've hardened up. Stags will tend to feed at higher elevations than hinds and yearlings. They will be stacking on the weight to recover from winter; fuelling antler growth and preparing for next year's rut. Hinds will be in fawn so if you're in an area of high animal numbers, now's a good time to kill two birds with one stone. If you're in an area that's been hammered by WARO, leave the mature hinds and pick out last year's yearling.

During September, the colour of deer skins is greyish brown. As we move into October, their coats should start to thin out and redden – but they won't be that beautiful, gleaming orange until late December-early January. Bear this in mind when you're glassing for them.

Reds and Wapiti will have dropped their antlers and will be growing velvet by now, but won't have this much growth up yet.



SIKA

Sika stags will retain their antlers until at least the end of September, though there will be the odd exception to that. By mid-October, a lot of stags will have cast them.

The stags will often be in the company of other, similar age-group males, while the hinds will still be in their family groups. As with the Reds above, hunt the winter country at this time of year - the warm and less frost-prone faces. They remain elusive in bush areas, doing most of their feeding in the open under the cover of darkness for a while. If you have the option, the scrub and clay pan country often produces better than the heavy bush.

In the bush, the majority of a deer's diet is still made up of leaf and windfall. Hunt as if for July/August until the first signs of growth occur in October above the frost level. By the end of the month, there should be deer everywhere and some easy meat will be obtainable - though don't expect them to be covered in fat just yet. Hunting the higher elevations like Te Puke and the tops will still be hard for a bit longer and I would leave those areas until at least December before spending hard-earned cash on a fly-in trip.

Around the farm edge country, the stags will most likely be hopping through the fence and feeding on any saved up grass or left over winter crops. They'll probably be fairly nocturnal though, so first or last light hunting will be required.

WAPITI

Fiordland has had a lot of early snow this winter and the animals are likely to be very hungry and will be waiting for the first hint of spring. The advantage that Wapiti will have on their side now is that there are fewer of them on the ground. Over the last several seasons, there have been

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higher numbers than wanted in the area so in the season just gone, the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation removed over 950 animals. The good stock that is starting to build up in the area will now have more and better tucker available.

The older bulls will have dropped their antlers by now and will be starting to grow velvet. Trophy hunting is out of the question but if you want to find a Red for the table, head country and the old slips are worth a look. Deer numbers have been reduced in the easier access country in a lot of areas so you might have to look a bit further. Once things

start to warm up, the animals will follow the growth as it moves up in altitude.



Fallow bucks will still have antlers on so you've got the chance for a trophy. Photo Daniel Bajt

FALLOW

Fallow bucks hold on to their antlers longer than most and the hunter still has a chance to bag a trophy. Just like other deer, Fallow will be looking hard for early spring growth, as this sets them up for the coming season - both mums feeding babies inside them and bucks growing heads. In the Greenstone and Caples, the animals will be poking around on the flats in good numbers. In the Blue Mountains, they will be starting to stick their heads out on the slips and milled areas. If you are lucky enough to have one of the blocks with scrub and young pine trees, then these areas always draw the deer out.

WHITETAIL

Whitetail are no different from other deer; food is the name of the game and mums with babies on the way and bucks who have long ago lost their antlers will be starting to move around after a winter of heavy hunting pressure. Whitetail like the open areas so they will be poking around the beaches and slips. If you want to shoot a trophy, you are too late but a nice fat, spring Whitetail is very good eating.

RUSA

If you managed to bag a Rusa stag over the rutting period - congratulations! If not, then keep at it, as you've got till at least December before the stags drop their antlers. Post rut is just as good a time to get a stag, as with any deer species, they'll be feeding up plenty after their intensive rut.

The spring growth will start to bring Rusa out onto slips and farm edges more frequently. Keep in mind how much of a magnet any warm and sunny areas are for the Rusa. Ideally, you will want to locate slips which catch as much sun as possible and have plenty of feed. Don't rule out any steep looking shingle faces though, as these elusive deer can appear just about anywhere.

Find yourself a suitable spot looking onto the slips - but not too close

as you don't want your scent getting on to it. Get yourself comfortable and make sure you are going to be able to get a good rest for when the chance of a shot arises. If you are shooting at distance, it is a good idea to know your ranges before something appears, as you may not have much time for a shot and you don't want to have to rush it.

You will know by now that patience is the key with hunting Rusa but don't give away all that hard work for a hind when there might just be a trophy Rusa stag nearby. Hinds are always seen out on open slips but those big fellas are a bit harder to locate!



Andrew McGregor with a Sambar stag

SAMBAR

The activities of Sambar at this time of year are much like the Rusa, except you are most likely to be hunting much tamer country than the rugged Ureweras! Also, similar to Rusa, stags will retain antlers till the end of December.

The arrival of spring growth will lure the Sambar back out onto the paddocks more frequently so be sure to stake out any tree edges at first and last light. Remember that Sambar can be very shy of daylight appearances so make the most of the very first and last bit of light.

Like Rusa, Sambar will be sure to soak up plenty of sun and warmth while keeping as hidden as possible. Ideal spots to watch over are small grassy clearings surrounded by gorse. This gives them a sense of security and they will be more likely to sit around for longer periods during the day.

Glass over these areas very carefully and be on the lookout for the slightest movements, as stags have a tendency to tuck up amongst the gorse, with sometimes just their antlers visible, which will be well camouflaged with the surrounding branches. Keep in mind however, that some stags may be rutting during this time, in what is considered the second rut, so keep an eye on the rutting areas as well for any signs of activity.

TAHR

Tahr will still be up pretty high in September. In my opinion, October - and November - are better months for tahr hunting as the animals move down the slopes to more recoverable terrain.

During spring, the bulls mob up in a similar fashion to stags.



The bulls have the most spectacular manes at this time of year. Photo Corey Geddes



Chamois will be starting to moult so their skins will be a little motley. Photo Corey Geddes

They separate from their female counterparts and seek good pastures in easily accessible terrain. This is generally the only time during the year when you'll witness bull tahr at lower elevations than Red stags!

Coat colorations are spectacular in early September (heavy, dark manes with lightened stripes from sun bleaching) but you'll want to take a bull cape no later than mid-September, as the hair starts slipping naturally after that.

CHAMOIS

Depending on the weather, which can be very variable at this time of year, you'll find chamois in various parts of the catchment. During fine, hot weather, focus on cooler (south facing) slopes with a bit of shade. Keep your eyes peeled in broken and folded country with fingers of scrub and the odd ice chute or patch of snow.

During the warmer weather, bucks are on their own, typically sitting in an elevated position and eyeballing their domain. During calm, still days, it's not unusual for a buck to remain stationed in one spot all day. Like deer, chamois will follow the good feed up open side creeks, fingers of scrub and onto knolls. On the West Coast, chamois are likely to be in that upper belt of sparse scrub.

Nannies typically feed in small groups (fewer than three) throughout the day. Pregnant nannies generally feed longer and further than bucks during spring because of the developing fetus.

Coat colorations are still pretty dark with tinges of orange and grey in September and their hair follicles will be slipping. Bear that in mind if you want to tan a chamois skin. As we approach October, their winter coats will be well and truly shedding. When stalking through chamois country, take a minute to check for patches of hair in and around prominent knolls and rocky promontories where chamois bed down for the day.

WATERFOWL

With the days drawing out and the temperatures starting to rise with the first hints of spring, we will all feel more like getting out and about. Canada geese that have spent the winter in locations and patterns that mostly result in frustration for the keen goose hunter will also start to feel the urge to get out and about.

Geese will become more territorial, with juveniles pairing up and adults dispersing to breeding areas. This will make them far more huntable from now on, as they get out of those winter habits and move and feed more often; flying further in smaller groups. If you are fortunate enough to live in an area where the goose season is open, cast aside those winter blues and get out for a goose hunt!

For those of us who have duck hunting on our minds regardless of the time of year, there is always something to do in preparation for May. Now is the time to really get serious with our predator control measures in a hunting area. Be sure to do it without causing any disruption to the waterfowl populations or putting any livestock or non-target species at risk. Set traps for stoats and ferrets and poison stations for rats around the wetland areas where you hunt. This will not only aid in the birds' nesting success and brood survival but will also benefit many other native species.



Bede Geary and Stu Sutherland blowing away those winter blues

