

In Pursuit of the Sitka Black-tailed Deer

by E.L. Young

To most people, the term "Alaskan Big Game" evokes images of bears, moose, or caribou. Lesser known Sitka black-tailed deer are often overlooked by nonresidents but are important meat and trophy animals along the southern coast. Deer are found in southeast Alaska, Prince William Sound, and the Kodiak Archipelago. They are seldom far from ocean waters and are most abundant on islands. The quality of the meat is excellent and venison is a mainstay of the diet of many Alaskans who live along the coast.

Sitka black-tails don't produce the impressive antlers sported by mule deer and rarely achieve the antler growth of trophy Columbian black-tails. Mule deer are generally absent from the state, although occasionally one strays in from Canada. To give Sitka black-tail hunters a fair chance to have their trophies recognized, the Boone and Crockett Club now places the Sitka subspecies in a separate category.

Population Problems

Deer numbers go down when severe winters strike coastal Alaska. When herds decline, deer have a tremendous ability to repopulate the habitat and, unless there is excessive predation or repeated severe winters, they soon regain high numbers. Wolves are a major predator on deer and may depress populations for years. Black bears kill deer when they have the opportunity, and brown bears occasionally prey on deer.

Uneven-aged mature timber is essential to deer habitat quality in Prince William Sound and southeast Alaska. Logging old-growth forests in southeast Alaska creates problems for deer by reducing wintering habitat. The effect is not noticeable as long as winters are mild. During severe winters the problem is pronounced as deer move into small areas of standing timber. There they are forced to compete for food and many die. In habitat where they occur, wolves quickly find remaining stands of timber and move from one stand to another, preying on the deer.

Windswept ridges on Kodiak are favored by wintering deer because they are blown free of snow, allowing deer to get at the browse. Kodiak's normally low snowfall lets deer winter above 1,500 feet in elevation, which rarely happens in the southeastern part of the state. Though Kodiak normally has mild winters that allow populations to reach high levels, the population has suffered several setbacks from severe winters since the late 1980s.

Hunting the Alpine

Hunters from outside Alaska are often surprised that the buck season in Alaska begins the first of August. In August, deer can be found from the seashore to the alpine, but hunting is at its best at the higher elevations. It is not unusual to see more bucks in the alpine than does or fawns. Bucks are commonly in velvet in August, but antler growth has usually slowed or stopped. Bucks rarely respond to a deer call that early, but there are enough exceptions to make it worth trying.

Hunters who try alpine hunting either love it or hate it. First of all, it is tough to get into the high country. In many areas deer share the range with mountain goats, and hunters need a little of a goat's sure-footedness to climb to the hunting ground. Secondly, it can be an ordeal getting the meat down to your boat or airplane.

Experienced alpine hunters do not carry or drag an entire deer down the mountain. The effort of hauling a deer over and around logs is a bit more than most of us can handle. Most alpine hunters quarter a deer if it is small, or completely bone larger ones and carry the quarters or boned meat down the mountain in a backpack. Trimming the fat and removing the bones substantially reduces the weight of a pack. Regulations require that all edible meat be taken, including the meat of the ribs and neck.

Although bucks may be numerous, resist the temptation to take more than one during a trek to the high country. If you have to make more than one trip bringing the meat down, it is possible that a bear will find your extra venison while you are hauling out your first load. If you must leave the meat temporarily, put it in a spot where you will have an unobstructed view of the site when returning. Disturbed soil vegetation may mean your meat has been discovered by a bear. Bears often cover a cache with soil debris. If you find yourself in this situation, approach cautiously (but not quietly) from upwind; the bear may be resting nearby and guarding its cache. If a bear contests your ownership of the meat, don't argue. There are other deer in the woods.

When hunting deer in brown bear country, it is always a good idea to have a rifle of at least 30-06 capability with heavy bullets. Be alert when field dressing your deer; the odor of deer blood and organs may prove irresistible to a brown bear. Remember that it is not legal to kill a bear to defend game meat. Always hang meat and other food well away from your campsite.

Alpine hunting requires good physical conditioning. Bike riding, hiking, and other aerobic activities will help you prepare for the hunt and enjoy it more.

Fall and Winter Hunting

Deer calls are most effective in late fall and early winter, but remember that there is still a chance of luring a bear to the call. Call where visibility is good so that you can see bears approaching and will have time to let them know that you are not a distressed fawn.

Tracking deer in the snow adds an element of excitement to the hunt. As snow deepens, deer avoid muskegs, clear-cut, and other openings and are found in the large timber.

As snow deepens, deer move into lower elevations and are often seen on beaches. There they browse on shrubs and chew on seaweed. You will often spot many deer from the water before you are able to make a successful stalk. On Kodiak and Afognak islands, deer may form huge herds on the beach during periods of heavy snow, but this behavior has not been observed in southeast Alaska.

Deep snow interferes with feeding, and hungry deer are less wary and easier to kill. Some hunters say meat is poor in late December or January, while others praise its quality. Whenever you kill your deer, keep the meat clean and cool to ensure the best flavor. Although a buck may be in the rut and very smelly in the field, careful handling of the meat and hide eliminates much of the problem. To avoid transferring the odor to the meat, try not to touch the meat of a rutting buck after handling the hide.

Winter storms often prevent boat and air travel, so be prepared to stay a couple of extra days. A light tarp, sleeping bag, and fire-starting materials are essential items that you can stow in the boat or airplane. A compass and a light pack with fire starter and other basic survival items are essential. You may shoot a deer late in the day and have to track it and delay your return to camp.

Where to Hunt

Deer seasons are closed in some parts of their Alaska range because of low populations. Seasons and bag limits vary greatly throughout the state and are closed on some of the islands. Winter die-offs may be severe in one location and light in another location a few miles away. Terrain and habitat quality are major factors in deer survival. For this reason, areas with high bag limits may not have high populations. If you are unfamiliar with the hunting location, it would be advisable to contact the local area wildlife biologist for an opinion before making final arrangements.



Lon E. Lauber

Most hunters use boats or airplanes to get to their favorite hunting ground. Hunters who live outside the area can charter a boat or airplane, and boats may be rented in some communities. In almost all of Alaska's deer country, a boat is useful. A small inflatable raft will add a lot of mobility and enjoyment to your hunt.

There are deer seasons in the following areas. Call the local Fish and Game office to get specific information: Game Management Units 1A and 2 (Ketchikan): 907-225-2475, Units 1B and 3 (Petersburg): 907-772-3801, Unit 1C (Douglas): 907-465-4265, Unit 4 (Sitka): 907-747-5449, Unit 6 (Cordova): 907-424-3215, and Unit 8 (Kodiak): 907-486-4791.

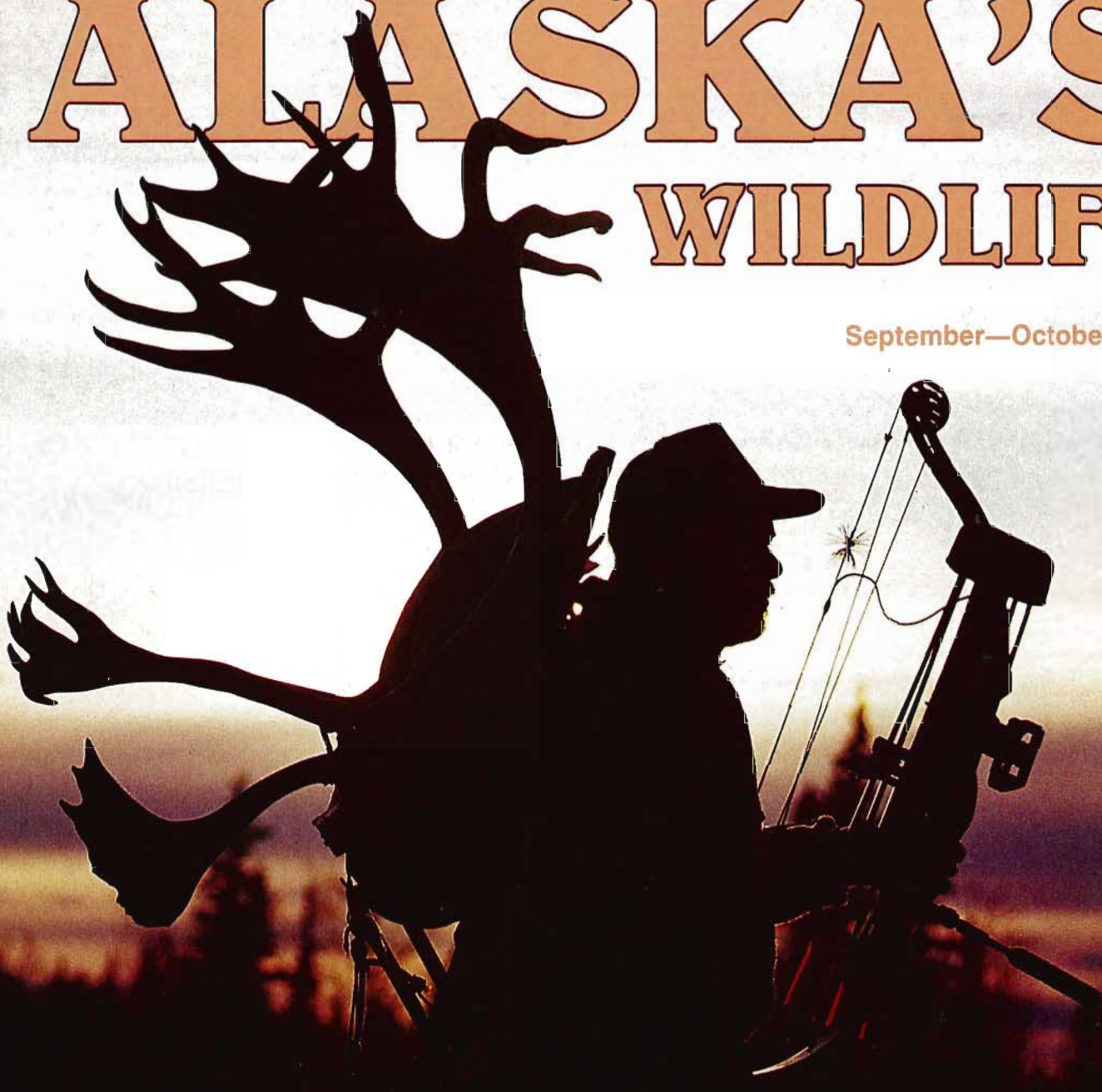
Registration permits may be required in some areas, so check the hunting regulations. Deer in Alaska are at the northernmost end of their range. Hunting Sitka black-tailed deer in the coastal climate is a unique experience that can become addictive.

E.L. Young serves as the area game biologist for the Division of Wildlife Conservation, ADF&G, Sitka. A 15-year resident of southeast Alaska, he has worked in deer research and management in Alaska, New Mexico, and Texas. On the opening day of deer season, he is likely to be found on the top of a southeast Alaska mountain looking for bucks.

The Magazine of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game

ALASKA'S WILDLIFE

September—October 1991
\$3.00



**BIG
GAME
HUNTING**

