

A Field & Game Guide to DEER HUNTING



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Why this eBook was written.

Getting a start in hunting isn't easy if you don't have family or friends to help show you the ropes. Many years ago, I joined Seymour Branch of the then Victorian Field and Game Association as what I'd call a "duck shooter". Several of the guys I met there have become good friends. They helped me learn to be a duck hunter, teaching me decoy layouts, digging and building hides, how to call ducks, and from time to time getting each other out of car or boat trouble. More recently, Ern Addington (Ballarat branch), Peter Jorgensen and others have helped mentor me in deer hunting. Thanks Ern and Peter. They and others have shared venison and knowledge from years of deer hunting, some of which you'll read below. I've been the beneficiary of a lot of people who have helped me become a better hunter.

This eBook is written for beginning deer hunters by someone who remembers what it's like to be new and the questions I sought answers for. I hope these pages help get you started, make it a bit less daunting, and help you stick with it. But if you already have experience hunting sambar, I hope you still find something to enjoy in this and maybe even get a couple of tips. It is a summary of what I've picked up from others along the way. This eBook is just a small way of "giving back" to help others as many others have helped me.

Thanks to everyone who have shared a campfire with me.

Getting Started.

Learning to hunt on your own isn't easy. In Deer magazine, Ken Slee wrote:

"One of the major obstacles to becoming a successful sambar hunter is learning to like the bush and becoming comfortable in it. A heavily forested mountain slope or a cold, fast-flowing river can look very daunting from the road, sufficient to make an inexperienced hunter hold back and really not come to grips with the job at hand."

And incidentally, when you're standing next to your vehicle looking up that mountain slope for the first time, it's worth remembering that because more light reaches the forest floor and there's more water run-off by a track, the bush is usually thicker there. Once you're in, it's not so daunting. If you get past this obstacle, sambar hunting is still challenging.

A mate of mine, Matt Beattie (who was also a relatively new sambar hunter) says, *"Many experienced hunters say that at the beginning or at some point you will want to give up and you will have these moments unless you get a lucky start. Stick with it. Time in the bush is the only answer and you have to work it out for yourself which is what makes it so rewarding"*.

And remember,

Satisfaction lies in the effort and not in the attainment, full effort is full victory.
(Mahatma Ghandi)

Get into it and stick with it. Sambar hunting is challenging, but it's also very satisfying. The feelings and emotion you will feel when you get your first deer "on the grass" will be one of the great "firsts" in your life. I have no words to describe it. I don't know whether it comes from a rush of endorphins or adrenalin, but it's a powerful experience.

I hope you get to experience it.

Good luck.

Ian Gould (Bendigo Branch)



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Get Involved in Your Branch.

I'm getting old (63). Over the years, FGA has been more than a club to me, it was a community of people with a shared passion. Hunting used to be a much more visible activity. The magazine used to advertise fox drives and I remember the "Black Duck Classic" where the North East branches used to camp together and compete for the quickest and most diverse bag back in camp. It was sort of a forerunner to the "Duck Hunt Challenge" which older members will remember. To some, it might look like branches don't hunt as much as they used to, but I think that's not true. I think it's just less visible. To get involved, you need to get involved. Branches are run by volunteers. If you want to go on a branch hunting camp, someone (maybe you?) has to step up and help make it happen. But there are probably already groups in your branch who go on hunting camps together. Because they don't get advertised these days, you need to be a bit proactive.

The thing about hunters in general and deer hunters in particular is they tend to be independent; it's not a team sport. To be a sambar hunter, you might walk a couple of km up a spur and along a ridge on your own. You have to enjoy that to enjoy deer hunting. In deer camp, if you expect someone will take you by the hand up a hill and point to a stag, you'll be disappointed. However, when others see you putting in an effort and having a go, then they WILL help. I think it's like there's an unwritten law that they'll only help those who are prepared to help themselves.

Professor Jordan Petersen (12 Rules for Life) describes some "rules" men impose on each other, including: do your work; pull your weight; stay awake and pay attention; don't whine or be touchy; stand up for your friends; don't suck up and don't snitch; don't be a slave to stupid rules; etc. Without wanting to ignore or discount any of the women and girls among our membership (who are very welcome and encouraged), these "rules" (IMHO) especially apply to deer hunters. Using myself as an example, I got to tag along with some others. I had done a bit of homework where I thought I wanted to hunt. It wasn't the best place and I was given a couple of better suggestions in camp. Same again at the next camp. In my third camp, without really asking, an experienced hunter took me out with him. It was a long walk over some fairly difficult terrain. The next day (same camp) another experienced hunter took me out with him, hunting independently in the same area. In my experience, you will get help if others see you are trying, so they know if they do help you, their help isn't going to be wasted. Remember, if someone is taking you with them, they may be sacrificing their own chances of a successful hunt in order to help you. Two people will make 3 or 4 times the noise of one.



There are people who are happy to help you get started in deer hunting and share a good time around the camp fire. But if you are a novice, be prepared to "jump in the deep end". A lot of deer hunters are very happy to help. But in my experience, they don't like "hand holding", it's "against the rules".

Different Types of Hunters

A new hunter asked if it was ok to take an animal for meat. He had somehow gotten the idea that our group were exclusively trophy hunters. This idea is wrong. Firstly, if only stags are taken, the quality of the wild herd will suffer. And with deer numbers being a problem in many regions, it's important for deer management that hinds are taken also. While some members may pass up hinds and does, in order to keep looking for a stag or buck, (and some who will pass up small stags to keep looking for a larger stag), most are happy to take any opportunity to put venison in the freezer. Some are meat hunters when the freezer is empty and trophy hunters when the freezer is full.

We have different types of hunters. We have those that "walk them up", stalkers (with and without dogs), "sit and wait" hunters, hound hunters, sambar only hunters, fallow and red hunters. And we hunt ducks, foxes, etc.

Sambar hunting in State Forest bears little resemblance to my experience of fallow deer hunting. Some fallow deer hunts on farm land have been not much different from hunting rabbits, only bigger! Sambar on the other hand, are said to be one of the world's most challenging game animal! I can believe it! When I talk of deer, I'm talking about sambar.

Five (or six?) Hunter Types

In the 1970s, Dr. R Jackson and Dr. R Norton of the University of Wisconsin made a study of over 1,000 hunters. They found that hunters go through five distinct stages over their hunting lives in terms of their view of "successful" hunting. Some people add a 6th type.

1. Shooter Stage

The impulse here is to get off a shot quickly, perhaps at any animal that appears. This eagerness can lead to bad decisions:

- the wrong animal being chosen,
- a poor shot being taken that wounds the animal or
- even a shot that endangers others.

Target practice, good mentoring and more experience will lead most hunters out of this stage quickly. People in the "shooter stage" will be frustrated hunting sambar. For the novice hunter especially, shots at sambar are few and far between. *If you are in the "shooter stage", spend time at the range and hunt something else. Sambar is not for you.*

2. Limiting-Out Stage (I call this the "meat hunter stage")

This hunter wants to always bag an animal. There's nothing wrong with this, especially if you want to use the meat. More experience and hunting with mature hunters can lead hunters out of this stage. If you want a trophy stag, you probably won't shoot one if you keep shooting hinds.

3. Trophy Stage

Success is judged by quality, not quantity. The hunter is selective and will pass on many opportunities that aren't the desired trophy. The hunter's patience and commitment are highly evolved.

4. Method Stage

The process and challenge of hunting becomes the primary focus of the hunter. A more challenging method, such as using a bow may be chosen. The hunter may choose to stalk or still hunt, rather than sit and wait.

5. Sportsman Stage

The total experience of the hunt is what is important to the sportsman:

- What animal is being hunted (a particular individual animal may be targeted),
- How it is being hunted,
- The immersion into nature and the companionship of who you are hunting with,
- all combine into creating a more sophisticated appreciation of the hunt.

6. Give Back

In the 6th stage, the hunter wants to pass on good hunting values, safety skills and responsible attitudes to others. They want to preserve our hunting heritage. The hunter might get involved with conservation programs which improves game habitat and game management and promotes hunting.

Many branches are fortunate to have many people who are happy to “give back”. I’m grateful to the people who “gave back” to me.

Ethics

As an FGA member, you are required to adopt the FGA ethical standards. The Game Management Authority also encourages sound ethics and the Bureau of Animal Welfare (Vic) has a code of practice. You can protect the future of hunting by hunting ethically and insisting others do too. The GMA says:

Respect your quarry

- Don’t waste. If you are going to take an animal, it is your responsibility to make full use of it. If you can’t do this, should you really be taking the shot?
- Being a trophy hunter does not excuse you from also recovering and using the meat.
- Marksmanship should be of the highest standard each individual can achieve and any limitations respected.
- Firearms must be properly maintained, and the calibres and projectiles used suitable for the task expected of them. Firearm safety must be practised at all times.

Respect your chosen recreation—become a hunter in all ways

- Enhance your hunting experience by learning to appreciate the bush — ALL of it, there is more than deer to see and enjoy.
- The responsibility for promotion of ethical hunting practices rests with all hunters.
- Respect the rights of other users of the environment.

Respect the law of the land—it is there for a purpose and defying it denigrates all hunters

- The real test of hunting ethics comes in deciding when you won’t rather than when you will, shoot.

The “Social Licence” to Hunt

In past generations, hunting was a normal part of life for a large section of the community and is still a tradition and lifestyle for many. But hunting is not a right. As far back as the late 19th or early 20th century, Teddy Roosevelt’s famous quote “*In a civilised and cultivated country, wild animals only continue to exist at all when preserved by sportsmen*” suggests a defence of hunting as a sport, even back then.

In order to keep hunting, we need to ensure that the majority of society is happy for a minority of us to hunt. This is sometimes referred to as the “social licence”. You can help keep our “social licence”:

- Be proud to be a hunter and be a good ambassador. Tell others. Offer to share venison. A former chairman of Field and Game Australia, Russ Bate says, hunters need to “*come out of the closet*”; to tell people proudly that you are a hunter.
- Share hunting pictures, but on social media like Facebook, don’t show too much blood, tongues hanging out, etc. Especially share pictures of you, family and friends enjoying wild game meat.
- Respect (the animals we hunt, the bush we hunt in, other bush users and the law)
- Travelling and in public, like it or not, you are a hunting ambassador. Be a good one.

There are a lot of benefits to hunting. Tell others about the benefits. Some of these are:

- Fresh organic lean meat. Game meat is very lean and very healthy.
- Traditions and connections to the bush. Aboriginals have a connection to “country”. So do deer hunters. Peter Burke (Quiet Footsteps) wrote, “***I am a deer hunter and without the forest, I am nothing***”. Connection to country comes from a shared knowledge of the land, deriving sustenance from the land and managing the land to sustain it. Hunting is conservation. Camping with family and friends is tradition.
- Personal growth and character development. Others often mention this but don't explain it. Deer hunting in the bush is not for the faint hearted. It can be an adventurous challenge that develops self-reliance, independence, perseverance and resilience, resourcefulness and awareness of oneself and one’s surroundings.
- Spiritual Growth. A lot of people say hunting and time in the bush “restores their soul”. Taking the life of a large animal can generate a lot of feelings and emotions. “Forest bathing” and spending time in nature is becoming a thing to de-stress and relax. Hunting can deliver all these benefits. “*Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.*” — Albert Einstein
- Marksmanship skills.

Deer Hunting Basics

Safety!

Remember, firearms safety begins with YOU

And DON'T wear brown in the bush. Deer are brown. Wear something orange. Deer are colour blind, hunters are not.



The Basic Rules:

- Treat all guns as if they are always loaded.
- Never let the muzzle point at anything you're not willing to destroy.
- Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on the target.
- Be 100% sure of your target and what is beyond it.
- **A reminder.** Keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction at all times. I once had something catch on the trigger and the rifle discharge unexpectedly. Now when I'm hunting, until I actually see an animal, I like to have a loaded magazine and empty chamber. At one time I used to like having a round chambered but with the bolt handle up (apparently a common practice in New Zealand and promoted by a sambar guide on YouTube). I stopped that when I fell and the bolt handle closed when I hit the ground. Some people have a round chambered but the rifle uncocked but in most rifles the firing pin is resting against the primer and a sudden bump may be enough to fire it. This is not a safe practice unless you have one of the few rifles that are designed so that the firing pin is retracted.

- Don't load a round until you're likely you'll be taking a shot. Use the safety but don't trust it.
- When you are climbing over large logs or crossing streams or fences, unload and be careful. Crossing obstacles is when a lot of accidents happen.
- **Accidents & Injuries.** NZ statistics show the vast majority of accidental shootings are between people in the same party and happen at distances of 25m or less, but more people accidentally shoot themselves than are shot by others (unload when crossing obstacles!). NZ statistics also show the majority of firearm related injuries are caused by the "baby boomer" generation. But injuries from shooting is not the major risk. Most injuries while hunting big game (NZ) come from falls, sprains and strains and carrying too heavy a load.

Know the Law

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse". READ THE GMA'S HUNTERS GUIDE.

Download it from here:

<https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/education/fact-sheets>

A quick summary of the Victorian laws is (2019, subject to change):

- All native birds and animals are protected unless declared to be game or pests.
- Travelling and in camp, firearms must be unloaded (magazines empty) and secured out of sight, with ammunition stored in a separate container (not a car glove box).
- No hunting from a half hour after sunset to a half hour before sunrise (no spotlighting, infrared, night vision etc, except on private property with the owner's permission)
- No hunting/shooting on or across roads. On roads and public places, rifles must be unloaded (this means empty magazines).
- Baits, lures and decoys (except duck decoys) are prohibited.
- Sale of game is prohibited.
- On private property, you **MUST** have the owner or manager's permission.
- Minimum calibres apply (243 for Hog/Fallow deer, 270 for Red/Sambar deer)
- Dog regulations apply

Knowing the law is YOUR responsibility. See GMA's other publication "Game Hunting in Victoria" for more details.

Planning the Hunt

"If you fail to plan, plan to fail".

1. Learn about deer and their habitat. Read books, search YouTube. There are some great hunting podcasts that are entertaining and informative. There's a list of some of my favourites at the appendix.
2. Make sure you have all your licences for the State(s) you are hunting in.
3. Get appropriate clothing and equipment
4. Scout the area. Google Earth is useful for "desktop scouting". Topographic maps too. Visit the area. Check if there are any season road closures or if it's recently been fire affected. If you are hunting on private property, make sure you have the owners' permission.
5. Sight in your rifle and practice marksmanship. The target "kill zone" for an ethical shot is about the size of a paper plate. You should be able to hit a paper plate size

target consistently at 50m standing offhand and 100m using some support. Don't practice off a bench. There are no benches in the bush.

Sambar and Their Habitat

Sambar's scientific name, *Rusa unicolour*, means one colour deer. They are brown. However, their tails can be a bit ginger or orange and the underbelly a bit paler. Hinds weigh on average about 180 kg and stags 230 kg (females are "hinds", not "does", the female fallow is a doe and the male fallow is a buck). If you haven't seen one, SSAA (Vic) have a fully body taxidermized one at their Springvale Range. Otherwise think of an animal about the size of a Shetland Pony. Fallow deer are smaller, not much bigger than a merino sheep. Sambar antlers have 6 tines (unless broken). 30" long antlers are large and what every trophy hunter wants on their wall. Antlers are cast and regrown each year. Sambar don't have a set breeding season, but there are peaks in births in January – February and May – June. A hind will typically have only one calf but may be seen with a calf at foot and last years' calf close by. They are not a herding animal and are usually seen either as a solitary animal or in a small group.

Sambar can be found almost anywhere there is heavy cover, but are predominantly in the forests in Eastern Victoria. They like farm fringe country and will feed on pastures at night.

Sambar are predominantly browsing, not grazing animals. They eat a variety of leaves, sticks, shoots, ferns, grasses, fruits and fungi. They will not generally eat a whole plant, but take a few leaves from here and a few from there. They feed mainly at night. Research found major feeding times to be in the late afternoon with activity declining to a low around midnight and other feeding activity around 1am and third feeding activity later but finishing before sunrise. There is little feeding activity between sunrise and early afternoon.

Deer movement usually increases with colder weather. On cold mornings, deer will seek out ridges and peaks facing East to get the sun. And in cold weather, deer need to eat more and will travel further to find warmer bedding cover. In summer, they will seek out cooler gullies. On mild autumn/winter days without much temperature variation, deer will move less, but may stay close to reliable food and water sources. Heavy rain and wind will drive deer to cover.

Deer don't move a lot. Some say it helps to think of them as lazy animals; they will pick a saddle or low point on a ridge to cross from one gully system to another. The home range of a hind is said to be about 2½ sq km (a circle of less than 1km radius) and stags' range is about 4 sq km (a circle a bit more than 1 km radius). Research says deer may travel less than 200m in the twilight hours.

It's said sambar never actually sleep but instead can "switch off" and rest one side of their brain while the other is alert. But sambar will bed down to rest. Bedding areas, called "couches", are often in sunny spots three quarters the way up a slope or at a gully head. They will have good cover and more than one escape route.

Sambar (especially stags) like to wallow. Fresh wallows, rub trees, preaching trees and scrapes are all signs a stag is active in the area.

Sambar have excellent hearing and sense of smell. Their eyesight is not so good. USA research on whitetail deer show deer do not see the same spectrum of colour that we do and reds and oranges are only seen as subdued greys or browns. However, they see the ultraviolet end of the spectrum quite well, which helps their night vision. USA advice is to

avoid blues and anything that reflects ultra violet light. This means don't wash your clothes in colour brightening detergents as they have UV reflectors in them. Sambar's vision is said to be near-sighted; objects at medium to longer distances appear as a bit of a blur. However even if blurred, they can spot any movement from a long way off. And deer vision is in a wide horizontal band. Whereas humans' peripheral vision is about a half circle, deer can see something more like a $\frac{3}{4}$ circle, but only in a narrow vertical band. If you are not on the same horizontal plane as the deer (for example in a tree stand) you may be outside the deer's vision. But if you are on the same plane and the deer is facing away, it may well be able to see you in its periphery vision.

If a deer picks up your scent in the wind, it will be gone. If it hears or sees you but isn't sure what you are, it may "honk" you. This is a very loud honk designed to startle you (and it does). It wants you to move so it can work out what you are.

Equipment

In our hunting group, items regarded as essential you **must** have are:

- An item of Blaze Orange clothing. A hat is the minimum.
- A handheld UHF radio. If you are buying one, get a 5W unit. Lower power units are a false economy. You'll be frustrated with a 2W unit being able to hear talk, but not being able to be heard yourself. And should you need help, you'll want others to be able to hear you!

This is all you need to start hunting. You don't need a firearm to hunt (chances are you won't use it in your first outings, or you can use a camera or just enjoy the experience) but other equipment you may need or want are, from the ground up

Boots

Some say this is the most important piece of hunting gear. Don't skimp on good boots. You will be walking in steep rocky terrain and you need good comfortable foot support. I get my boots from Delta Footwear <https://www.deltafootwear.com.au/> which is run by a friend of my son who has a background in special ops (those guys need good boots!). Delta stocks top brands including Lowa, Salomon, Merrell etc.

Gaiters

Gaiters will help keep snow, leeches, sticks and seeds etc out of your boots. They also offer a reasonable amount of snake bite protection. Most branch members wear gaiters. A quick word on snakes, Australian snakes have relatively short fangs that (I'm told) often don't get through loose clothing. Compared to the American rattlesnake, which has very long powerful fangs, our snakes have a very poor venom delivery system. I'm told we don't need a super-tough snake proof gaiter that Americans may want for their rattlesnakes.

Clothes

"The best camouflage pattern is called 'sit down and be quiet!' Your Grandpa hunted deer in a red plaid coat. Think about that for a second" - Fred Bear, founder of Bear Archery.

Good advice for winter hunting clothes is to avoid cotton. Wet cotton may kill you from hypothermia.

Underwear/Base Layer

In the cold, a base layer is a “must have”. Merino wool is warmer (sometimes too warm) and more expensive than polypropylene. Unless it’s really *really* cold, wool may be too warm. **Don’t use cotton.** When cotton is wet, it will keep you cold.

Middle Layer/Hunting Clothes

Deer are colour-blind. Some people say that specialty camouflage patterns are made to look good to hunters, not to hide you from deer. In days past, people hunted deer wearing jeans and red checked shirts. Wear neutral colours. Research suggests deer see blue colours well, so avoid blues. **Avoid brown colours for safety – don’t make yourself resemble a deer!** Wearing something blaze orange or red for safety is a good idea. Remember, deer are colour-blind but hunters aren’t.

I prefer synthetics to cotton or wool. Polar fleece is great in cold weather. Personally, I find wool too hot and when wet, cotton is heavy, slow to dry and makes you cold. Many like Fleecy tracksuit pants. Keep an eye on the weather and dress accordingly.

Wear a hat. A blaze hat or other item of blaze is mandatory at branch hunts. A hat helps break up your outline, gives you sun protection and helps retain body heat in cold weather.

Outer Layer

Waterproof/windproof layer. Depending where you are or what time of year, you may not need these. If you don’t have these, a wet weather hunt can be a miserable experience.

Technology

UHF Radio. At our camps, carrying a UHF radio is regarded as mandatory. Get a 5-Watt unit. Garmin Rinos are popular.

GPS. The Garmin Rino combines a 5W UHF radio with a GPS unit with map display. With it you can see the location of other hunters, if they are carrying Rinos and sync with yours. However, another school of thought is it’s better to have a GPS separate from the radio, so that you still have one unit operating if the other fails. Many like have a GPS unit that displays topographical maps.

If you are not venturing deep into the bush, in my view, you don’t need to spend a lot of money on a top-of-the-line GPS. Something like a Bushnell “Backtrack” can be had on eBay for less than \$40. While it doesn’t have maps, it lets you save several locations, such as the camp, car, the deer you shot, etc and shows you the direction and distance to saved locations. Combined with a printed map, these can do ok.

Another GPS option is to use your smart phone. Most newer phones have built in GPS. If you have a model with a compass, you can get an app with offline maps to navigate. However, be aware that the GPS in phones is usually very power hungry, so use it sparingly and carry battery backup.

Compass and Maps. “Low tech” backup in case your other technology fails.

If you are not familiar with reading topographic maps, you should get familiar. The GMA Hunters guide has some instruction. Otherwise buy a Scouts Handbook or use Google.

Being able to read the terrain on maps will help you find likely deer locations and may help you find the easiest way back to camp.

**** NOTE **** if you are carrying a rifle and using your GPS or compass for direction, the steel in your rifle can affect the direction of the compass. Put your rifle on the ground and take a couple of steps to the side so the magnet isn't affected by the iron.

PLB. Personal Locator Beacon. These small units cost around \$400 and have battery shelf life of 8-10 years. They are great life insurance. If you are on your own and out of phone or radio signal, if you suffer an injury or snake bite, the PLB might save your life. Many deer hunters carry these units.

Optics

With optics, you generally get what you pay for. High quality lenses let a lot more light through to your eyes but are expensive. As you get older, (according to the Swarovski sales manager) your eyesight isn't as good as it used to be, so it gets more important to get quality optics. In bright light at midday, you may not notice much difference in the quality of optics. It's in poor light, the prime hunting times of first and last light, that good quality lenses come into their own. If you try out a couple of different brands, either at a gun shop or someone else's scope, try to do it near sunset or in poor light. That is when you will notice the most difference.

Binoculars. These are essential. 8x35 or 10x40 are a popular choice. 8x are lighter to carry, wider field of view and your vision may be steadier (less jumpy) than 10x. But 10x may be more popular. The optics should be as good as your rifle scope and visa-versa. It's no good being able to see a deer in your binoculars at last light if you can't see it in your rifle scope. I like waterproof ones.

Rifle Scopes. Depending where and how you hunt, you may prefer open sights. Most deer are shot at less than 100m and open sights do fine if there's enough light. However, if you want a scope (I do) then think about the size. Scopes with a large variable zoom (e.g., 2-12x or 3-18x) with a 30mm tube are bigger and heavier than say 1½-4x with a 25mm tube. If you are carrying your rifle long distances in the mountains, you might welcome the lighter weight. And do you really need a lot of magnification? Remember lower magnification gives you better field of view. Long distance hunting is very specialised. To me, 100m in the bush is a long shot. My longest shot at a deer to date was 170m. I'd take a 300m shot. If I saw a deer at 400, I think I'd try to get closer. Gundigest.com has an article on this and say a 4x is good for fallow sized deer to 300m and 6x out to 400m.

At first and last light, if your scope has a thin reticle (a.k.a. crosshairs), you might find them difficult to pick up on a dark target with a dark background. Sometimes I wish my scopes had an illuminated reticle or red dot. I think my next scope purchase will have one. But my advice would be to talk to some experienced deer hunters and ask what they like and why. I wouldn't take advice from a gun shop or Facebook.

The Rifle.

One time editor of Outdoor Life magazine, Jack O'Connor wrote "*the big game rifle is the stuff of romance ...*" and a quality rifle in a walnut stock is a thing of beauty. However, you may not like dropping your *object d'art* as you slip on mossy rocks or muddy slopes in the rain. After a hunt at Eildon, where I did just that, I bought a second-hand Howa 1500 synthetic as my "wet weather" rifle. Although I have a Howa, I like the Weatherby Vanguard

(which comes out of the same factory) better. I don't like the budget Remington, Ruger, Savage or Winchester rifles. I like the Tikka T3, Mausers, Sauer, Winchester Model 70 (I have 2) and Browning. However, the budget rifles are more accurate than most people holding them. They are perfectly fine for the job. Rifles in the price range of the Tikka T3 and up will have better quality stocks (an aid to accuracy) and barrels that don't foul as easily and are easier to clean and should be more accurate over their life. But it mostly comes down to a personal choice, do you like the feel and finish of the rifle? Is it a quality you'll be happy with or will you always wish you'd saved up a bit more for something a bit better? But remember, a sambar rifle can get rough treatment in the bush.

If you are the type of hunter that will walk up spurs and along ridges to hunt, you might want to consider a lighter weight rifle or what's called a mountain rifle. There's a couple of good articles on mountain rifles on the internet. Chuck Hawks (www.chuckhawks.com), says *"Those who know advise that weight saved in the mountains is a huge bonus. That includes the total package of what you take up, most of which is in the weapon's delivery system, which is YOU. Why obsess over a few ounces of rifle weight when statistics reveal that most of us are more than several pounds overweight?"*

Any modern rifle of the right calibre will do a good job. Synthetic stocks are generally favoured in a deer rifle.

Ammunition & Calibres

Contrary to what you may often hear, bullet placement is NOT everything. A bullet has to penetrate into the vitals of a deer and then destroy enough tissue to deliver a quick and humane death. Some years ago, a reloading magazine published an array of pictures of bullets shot into wet paper pulp at various velocities to see how they expand. It confirmed that target bullets don't expand and are not suitable for hunting. Varmint bullets are not designed to penetrate but to blow up inside a rabbit or fox. Don't hunt deer with bullets designed for targets or varmints.

For Fallow Deer and Hog Deer, the minimum legal calibre is 243 (6mm) with a bullet weight of at least 80 grains. My experience matches some others' advice which is fallow deer are not hard to kill, and they are especially susceptible to the shock of high velocity bullets. I think any high velocity legal sized hunting bullet, put in the right place, will easily kill a fallow deer. But if you buy a 243 (or 25 or 6.5mm) for fallow, that limits you to fallow (and hog deer). If you are buying a rifle for deer, I'd strongly recommend a "sambar legal" calibre.

The minimum legal calibre for sambar deer is 270 with a bullet weight of at least 130 grains. The 270 has been used to kill a lot of sambar (and moose in the USA and Canada) but in my circle, more popular calibres would be the 7mm magnums, 308W, 30-06, 30 magnums, and the 338 magnums. I've also seen (but are less common) 375s and 458s. While a 7mm-08 is perfectly adequate with a well-placed shot (e.g., a broadside heart-lung shot), a cartridge with a bit more "authority" should perform better when deeper penetration is needed, for example a quartering away shot, or when the shot isn't quite perfect (read below under the heading, "Why We Miss").

It's said sambar, weight for weight, are much tougher and harder to kill than other deer. Bruce Bertram (Bertram Bullets) says sambar are less susceptible to high velocity bullets than fallow, and a heavy deep penetrating bullet works best, but pick a high velocity load for fallow. Around the campfires, it's also said that one of Victoria's professional sambar hunting guides hates it when a client turns up with a 300 Win Mag. Apparently, he says a

client with a 300WM invariably has a flinch and wounds the animal. You are better off having a milder calibre you can shoot well than a powerful magnum that causes you to flinch and miss. However, the 300 and 338 Winchester Magnums have recoil similar to a 12 gauge with high velocity waterfowl loads. If you can handle the recoil of duck load, you should be ok with a magnum, if you want one.

Personally, I'd avoid the "short magnums". Some people love them but these cartridges have a fat body and being shorter, feed from the magazine at a sharper angle and I've read they can have feeding issues. You don't want to be in a rush to load a round for a shot at a stag and have trouble getting the round into the chamber.

If you are not used to the recoil of magnums, many suggest a 270, 308 Win or a 7mm Rem Mag as a better choice. The 308 and 7mm's have milder recoil and are usually very accurate. An advantage to the 308 is the ammunition is cheaper, so you can practice more. At the time of writing, Remington Core Lokt ammunition in calibres like 308 and 30-06 is about half the price of the magnum calibres.

American bullet manufacturers help you choose bullets by the class of game you are hunting. American whitetail deer are about the size of fallow deer, so pick a "deer" bullet for fallow. Sambar are much bigger and tougher than fallow and a big stag is more the size of an elk (wapiti) than a whitetail deer. When buying ammunition or reloading bullets for sambar, look for a bullet designed for elk. And if you reload, I'd like to put in a free plug for my mate, Bruce at Bertram Bullets. They are Australian (Victorian) made and I think are a very good standard "cup and core" bullet. I'd pick a heavy for calibre bullet for sambar.

Deer Calls

In the USA, whitetail deer and elk calls have been around a long time. During the rut, fallow deer will respond to calls and sounds mimicking antlers locking together as bucks duel for the right to breed. Sambar can make a squeal type sound and I've heard hunters say that they can respond to a fox call. A recent product is the Flexmark Sambar Call, which mimics this squeal. Search for demonstrations of it on YouTube.

A mate of mine has some success with a sambar call. When he gets honked (sambar will "honk" when they think there may be danger but don't know what it is), he responds with a sambar call can sometimes fool the deer into thinking you are another deer.

More on deer calls under the "Fallow Deer" heading below.



Day Packs

Day packs don't need to be large. Peter Burke (author of "Quiet Footsteps") recommends a small one so you can't pack unnecessary gear. You should carry what will save your life in an emergency and then only what you will need for the hunt. The pack itself is best made of a quiet fabric, so it doesn't make a loud or unnatural noise in the bush as you move through it.

Here's a sample list. Some would say it's too much; others carry more:

- Water bottle (or camelback)

- Snacks/Lunch.
 - Avoid salty foods that will make you want to drink more. Trail mix, fruit sandwiches or bagels are popular. I like a meal replacement bar, an apple and a UHT milk “breakfast” drink (you’re carrying water anyway, just carry a bit less water if you are worried about weight).
- Head lamp and/or torch. One with red L.E.D.’s is suggested if you want to walk into a location before dawn. Red is less visible to deer.
- Spare batteries
- Toilet paper - handy to mark where you took a shot from as well
- Wind indicator (powder puff one) or cigarette lighter (flame indicates wind, and good for emergencies)
- Electrical tape (to tape over the muzzle to keep debris out).
- Secateurs (to cut blackberries etc - sometimes needed to get to a downed animal or make a shortcut back to cross a creek or get back to camp)
- “Kill Kit”
 - Length of cord (to help hold the animal from sliding downhill etc)
 - Knife and sharpener (butcher type knives are easier to sharpen)
 - Quarter master meat bag and 3 calico meat bags (Moroka.30) and a large plastic garbage bag (can double as a poncho if you are caught out in bad weather)
 - Plastic/Latex gloves
 - Folding pruning saw or similar (to cut the skull to recover antlers)
- Emergency Kit:
 - Personal Locator Beacon (PLB)
 - Water and hydro-light satchel in a zip lock bag to keep dry
 - Firelighters. Either cut pieces of bicycle inner tube or cottonwool and Vaseline work if wet. Have an extra (spare) cigarette lighter.
 - 6-inch glow stick in a PVC tube - a great back up light source that lasts for 8 hours. The pipe stops it from being cracked until you need it.
 - Small first-aid kit and snake bite kit in the warmer months and a
 - lightweight (foil) emergency blanket.
- 3-4 rounds of spare ammo (also useful as an emergency signal)
- Depending on the season and weather outlook:
 - Extra clothing layer, spare (dry) thermal underwear
 - Light weight rain coat.

Deer Camps

Parkinson’s Law says, “work expands to fill the available space”. A corollary is, “camping gear expands to fill the available space”. I know some guys who bring in a tandem trailer full of comforts into camp. I have to admit, sometimes my 4-door ute had barely enough room for 2 people. Which is funny when I think about my recent NZ hunt where everything I needed for 4 days was on my back.

I have a group of mates who get together for a week-long camp once and year and other shorter camps. We organise it so different people take in different gear for “base camp”. We’ll camp together but hunt independently. But we are there for each other if we need help with a carry out or if we get stuck. We will usually (not always) have camp ovens, gas BBQ, hotplate over the campfire, hot water (stainless steel keg heated by the fire), camp

shower and a few cooking utensils. Also, a large tarp, folding tables, L.E.D. lights powered off batteries (solar panels and generator backup), a first aid kit and other gear.

Camping Gear

Something to sleep in. If you only had a sleeping bag and mat, or want to travel light, you could sleep under tarps. To be more comfortable, bring a stretcher too and a swag if you prefer. If the weather outlook isn't so good, maybe bring a tent. And don't forget to bring a towel, you might get wet. Some people have a basic set up, others more elaborate and some sleep in the back of their ute. It's up to you.



Lights Bring a headlamp and an extra torch. You should have a headlamp or torch in your hunting gear. I like extra lights for camp and save my hunting headlamp for hunting. That way I can't forget to put it back in the hunting pack or run its batteries down. Some sort of lantern is nice in camp.

Chair. Something to sit on by the fire - don't forget a camp chair. If it's cold or wet, maybe also a piece of foam mat to put over the chair for insulation or if the chair gets wet.



Salt. Salt is for preserving skins for mounting. It's a good idea to have some salt in your car or ute if you have ambitions of mounting a trophy. Fine salt is better than coarse salt. A bag from a swimming pool supplies shop is cheaper than supermarket salt. 10 kg

Maps, compass, GPS. Some areas are easy to navigate and are close to roads. Some people go deeper into the bush. Regardless, it's always good to know where you are. A compass and a printed map are a good backup to GPS. See more under "Equipment".

Clothes. I like to have travel clothes, camp clothes and hunting clothes (keep smoke and camp smells out of your hunting clothes, and look semi-respectable going home) and spare boots (mine always get wet). See more about clothes under "Equipment".

Firewood. If you are arriving in the evening and want a fire that night, maybe bring some firewood with you so you don't need to collect it in the dark.

Garbage Bags. You brought it in, take your rubbish home.

Spade or Shovel. If you are not camping anywhere with toilet facilities, bring something to dig a hole for your toilet.

Food and water. Bring drinking water unless you are happy drinking river water (generally not recommended). Every deer hunter I know enjoys a beer, wine or whisky by the campfire after they finish hunting for the day, but in moderation. I've noticed a big difference in the amount of alcohol consumed in "deer camp" compared to "fish camp". Deer hunting is a lot more physical. You're not going to hunt well if you are feeling a bit under the weather from imbibing the night before.

Depending on your choice of food, you may not need much of your own cooking gear. While I actually carry more, I really only need a knife fork spoon, plate, bowl, mug, a billy and something to wash them with. And hand cleanser.

Here's some camp food ideas:

	My typical food	Other ideas
Friday Evening	Supermarket (roisserie) chicken with pre-packed salad	BBQ meat with canned vegies, heated on the camp fire or BBQ hotplate.
Breakfasts	Instant Porridge satchels (x2) Coffee	Eggs and bacon on the BBQ hotplate
Lunch & snack (hunting)	Apple Aldi Meal replacement bar 250ml UHT breakfast drink	Fruit and trail mix or nuts Muesli bar Sandwich or bagel etc
Evening (cooking after dark – keep it simple)	Can of chunky beef soup, add a can of beans, garlic and chilli. Cheese and crackers	Same as Friday, or packet pasta or other? Something savoury around the fire (often someone has venison salami or jerky)
	Another favourite of mine is pasta (shelf stable ravioli or similar) with a can of sauce and parmesan cheese). Remember the branch trailer has camp ovens. I've used them to cook pizza, bake jacket potatoes and you could roast meat (venison) too.	

Some things I like about group camps

I learn something every time I hunt. Some of the great things about camping in a group are:

- Learn and Share.
- Assistance. When you shoot a deer kilometres away from a road, you'll appreciate being in a camp with people to help recover your trophy and meat. (But remember, if you ask for help with a carry-out, it's an unwritten rule that you share the venison)
- Safety. If you're part of the camp, you'll tell others where you intend to hunt. This is partly to keep others out of your hunting area, but also for safety. If you don't come back at your expected time, the others in camp know where to start looking for you, or at least move closer for radio contact to see if you need help with a carry out, a bogged car, or something worse.
- Facilities. You can share the load and each bring in some gear to make camp more comfortable.

Where the Deer Are

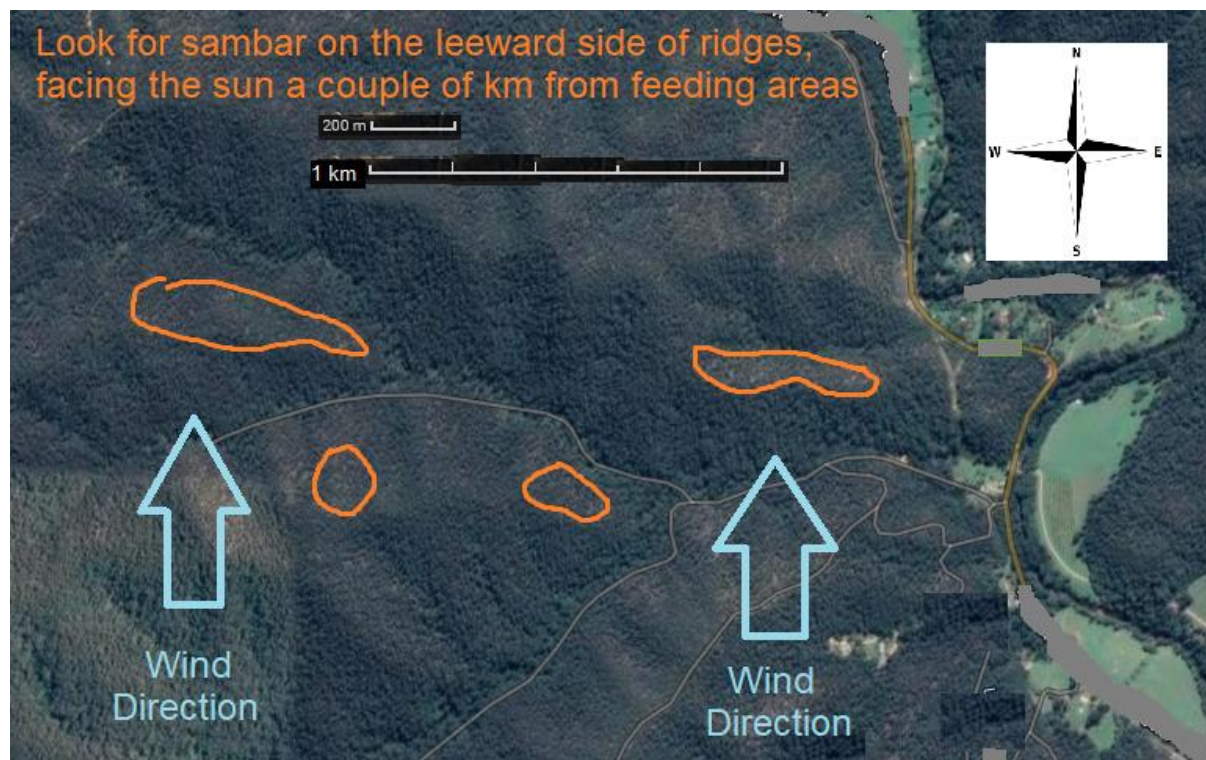
"Deer are where you find them" -a Sambar Hunter.

Sambar range is increasing and can be found nearly anywhere there is good cover for them to refuge in during the day. If you don't have any idea where to start, look in any of the State Forests or huntable National Parks east of the Hume Freeway and North of the Princes Highway. Places like Kevington (anywhere along the Jamieson-Woods Point Rd), Rubicon/Marysville State Forests, around "Buttercup" or "Bennies" near Whitfield. Anywhere in forests around Woods Point.

If you really are having trouble finding a first spot, look a few km past Kevington on the Woods Point Rd. approx. 37° 23' 00" S 146° 12' 16" E. You'll find plenty of deer sign a couple of hundred metres into the forest on the south side of the road. In the firebreak under power lines there is (or was) a skeleton. The north side is pastured private property, keep out and don't shoot that direction. I don't think they like deer hunters, so if you go there, be discrete and do the right thing. And don't everyone go there at once!

Desktop Scouting

Do a bit of desktop scouting on Google Earth. I also look at the bushfire maps and avoid areas that had fires more than a couple of years back. Bushfire regrowth can be too thick to hunt in. Keep an eye on the weather and prevailing winds and look for a place to hunt into the wind (see the below section "Using the Wind"). If the weather's cold, deer will tend to be on the North or Eastern faces getting more sun. Expect them to be on high ground during the day. Look for saddles or some sort of natural corridor where they may travel. Early morning or late evening, expect deer to be moving to or from feeding areas. Farm fringe forest can be a good place to look. Do some homework and pick a couple of places.





Get involved at your FGA branch and ask if anyone hunts deer. You may be surprised how helpful other deer hunters can be, especially fellow branch members. When you find someone, you can ask, *"I was thinking about this spot, what do you think?"*. You'll likely be told, *"yeah, that's worth a look"* or else, *"I reckon you ought to try here (pointing at a map on his phone) instead"*. As a sambar novice, I felt I got more help when others see me having a go. And you want to develop your own desktop scouting skills.

If you want printed maps, you can download the GMA maps. And you can download more detailed topographic maps (fees apply) from VicMap or find a camping shop that sells maps.

Finding Deer

Having picked a spot to look for deer, get out there. Whether you are hunting fallow on farm land or sambar in bush, the better you know the area and deer movements, the more successful you'll be. Ken Pearce in his classic book *"Walking them Up"* says in your first trip to a new area, you should walk up the main gully, looking for the best feeder gullies, tracks or slide marks on steep banks, where there is thick cover, wide gullies with seepage that may contain a wallow. After reaching the head of the main gully, swing around and come down via the first feeder gully, back up the next, and down the next and so on. If time permits, check out the feeder gullies on the other side. A good picture will start to form about the area and its deer. Mark on your GPS or map the locations of rub trees, wallows, feeding area, bedding areas, etc. If you didn't find any sign of deer, select another gully system and start again. When you find a good gully system, you should commit to it for a few hunts at least.

Rex Hunt used to say, *"don't fish where the fish ain't"*. Deer hunters say, don't hunt where you can't see. If the bush is too thick to see any distance, it doesn't matter if deer are there, you'll never see them. Hunt in relatively open forest.

Deer Sign



Deer droppings will be the most common sign you'll see. No droppings, no deer, move on. They look similar to sheep's but don't usually clump together. A young calf's droppings can look similar to a rabbit's. If they are very very fresh, they will be warm! If still very fresh, they will be covered in mucous that's sticky and will smell more. Pick them up, crush them, smell them. If they are not so fresh, they will have less smell and have formed a bit of a crust. You can only learn by doing.

The next most common sign is a rub tree. Smaller flexible saplings are preferred by stags. If you see bark rubbed off a large tree, it may be another animal. Down low it could be a wombat. Is there fresh "sawdust" on the ground? Scrape a bit of bark off with the back of your knife and see if it's the same colour to gauge how old it is. If it's fresh, there may be a stag active in the area.

Other sign to look out for are plants that have been eaten, tracks, preach trees, wallows. If you are not seeing fresh sign in an area, move on.

One way to find a spot to hunt is to drive along roads or tracks, looking at the banks on the side of the road for tracks or game trails where deer cross. When you find a freshly used one, follow the game trail.

Weather

Some people like to "hunt the front", the weather front or changes in weather. Sambar can be more active before a storm and after heavy rain clears. Deer don't like heavy rain and will seek shelter from it, but they don't mind light rain and can be more active in it. Rain can help you move around without making as much noise and helps your scent from dispersing as far. And from time to time, sambar make shake to throw off excess water from their coat. This extra movement sometimes gives them away.

In wet weather, a lot of other people may stay home or in camp. You are less likely to have deer spooked by others in the bush.

Now, Let's Go Hunting!

Believe in magic! Sambar can appear and disappear out of nowhere. Sambar are sometimes called the ghosts of the bush. I've had them appear 25 meters in front of me, seemingly out of nowhere and when I raise my rifle, they take a couple of steps and seem to

disappear again! To me, it's the challenge of Sambar that makes them such a great experience. Some of my friends are very successful and have freezers full of venison. If you want a challenging and rich hunting experience, hunt sambar. Sambar hunting is different from fallow or red deer hunting. Don't get me wrong, all are great. But for me, sambar is it!

The “10 Commandments”. This is “tongue in cheek” but essentially true. It's been adapted from a larger article, “10 Commandments of Elk Hunting” by David Petzal, Field & Stream, September 2011 (edited with a couple of Fred Bear's Commandments and one of my own thrown in for good measure). You can read David Petzal's full article here:

<https://www.fieldandstream.com/blogs/gun-nuts/2011/09/ten-commandments-elk-hunting/>

- I. Thou shalt be in shape, for sambar dwelleth in the mountains, not in the flatlands; if thine ass resembleth 10 kilos of chewed bubble gum, bitter shall be thy lot.
- II.. Thou shalt hunt where the sambar are, not where the sambar ain't.
- III. Thou shalt not whine that the pace is too swift, or that thou cannot get thy breath, or that thou see-est stars, for thy hunting partner shall care not, and mercy shall not be yours.
- IV. Thou shalt not stuff thy pack with all manner of goods thou need-est not. It shall do naught but rob thee of thy breath and turn thy knees to jelly.
- V. Thou shalt not slam ute doors, nor speak above a whisper, nor tramp through the bush like the hosts of Gilead, for thou art in the backyard of the sambar, and sharp are his senses, and he shall flee from thee.
- VI. Thou shalt buy and wear good boots for if ye look after thy feet, thine feet will look after thee.
- VII. Thou shalt learn to shoot as swiftly as the hawk fly-est, and thou shalt not fiddle-f*** with thy gear, nor adjust thy scope, nor set up thy bipod, for thou hast not time but thou shalt practice thy offhand shooting, for that may be the only shot that thou receivest.
- VIII. While the sambar yet mov-eth, thou must shoot, for blessed is he who end-eth the life quickly, and accursed is he who let-eth an animal suffer for the sake of a one-shot kill.
- IX. Strong must be thy bullet; all else is but the dung of horses.
- X. The worst day thou shalt have hunting sambar is better than the best day of whatever else thou do-est.

Hunting Techniques.

As already said, “deer are where you find them”. I've heard of deer being shot after the it has walked through camp and just meters off roads. But some people like to hunt a couple of kilometres off the road (or 3 ridges away, to where most hunters won't bother going) before they start seriously hunting.

If you are new to deer hunting generally and sambar hunting in particular, don't expect to have a successful hunt in your first few hunts. Remember sambar are the most challenging

game animal to hunt in Australia and probably would be listed in the world's top 10 most difficult. They are not easy and you should expect to have several hunts before you learn enough to be successful.

There are a few basics, but different people hunt differently and what works for some doesn't work for others. I'm still learning. Some people are happy sitting and waiting for a deer on a well-used game trail. Others like to be more active and keep moving.

Deer are creatures of habit. If not disturbed, and with food and water around, they will keep visiting the same spots in the same area. To know where and when they will be in a particular spot, you need to get out there and learn the local area. There's no substitute for spending time in the bush. But do it intelligently. Look for sign. Do deer feed here? Rest here? Or move through here from feeding to resting or visa-versa? Try thinking like a deer. Their natural predator is the tiger and they are concerned about not being eaten, food, sex, and shelter. And remember they have 4 legs, not 2 and they can go just about anywhere in the bush if they want to or need to.

Because deer typically feed at night and will move back to their bedding or resting area **before** first light, there's no point getting up especially early to hunt deer if you are hunting them in their resting areas later in the morning. However, if you find well used game trails leading from a feeding area (e.g., a farm), then getting in a position to sit over the trail while it's still dark can be productive.

From morning through to mid-afternoon, look for deer in higher ground. With knowledge of the area, you'll be able to plan a hunt depending on the day's wind and weather conditions.

Walking them up. One way of hunting is to get up high on the slopes and contour around. If you've spent time in the area, you'll have a reasonable idea where the deer may be and use more care and attention at those places. If you are higher up than the deer (they often bed $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up, your previous scouting may have found some couches), you'll have an advantage. And if you are hunting a gully, getting higher to look down into it, you'll see more than if you were low in the gully. Sambar's instincts are to climb high at signs of danger. And deer often don't notice things higher than them (why tree stands work). With this type of hunting, you need to be prepared to shoot at a moving target and be able to aim and shoot in 2 – 3 seconds.

Peter Jorgensen says, "If you are not seeing deer, you're not moving fast enough". Jorgie also says he walks quickly through an area if he doesn't see any very fresh deer sign. If there's no fresh sign, there's no deer. Don't waste time but hunt somewhere else. When you see fresh sign, stop, glass, and move slowly.

When in an area with deer, don't sound like a human. It's impossible not to make any noise, but be as quiet as you can (don't have any rattles or squeaks in your gear) and break up your steps. Nothing in the bush, except humans, has a regular pace. Animals take a few steps, stop and look or eat. Take a few more steps, etc. You should do the same but when you stop, use your binoculars.

Stop at the noise. You might quickly forget the sound of a snapped twig, but the deer won't. If you make an unusually loud noise and you think animals are close by, stop and stand still as long as you can. Imagine you are a tiger (sambar's natural predator) wanting to catch it in its bed. Freeze. Listen, look and don't move for 10 minutes. Use your watch so you're not tempted to move early. You might feel you've blown it and say to yourself, "bugger it" and go on making more noise. Don't. A deer might be looking in your direction for a long

time. If it doesn't see or smell you, it might relax and go back to whatever it was doing before the noise. The wait can bring you a shot.

Glassing. From a good vantage point, use binoculars or a spotting scope to find deer across gullies (or further). Once spotted, put in a stalk to get in range. Or if you are proficient at long range shooting, take the shot (not for the average hunter, long range shooting needs a lot of long-range practice, quality rangefinders and ballistics calculators, and specialist scopes)

Still Hunting. This uses the wind and your scent to flush the deer. Moving stealthily, when you come across cover where there may be a deer you can't see, slowly and quietly move upwind. When the deer scents you but otherwise isn't alarmed, it may slowly get up and move, giving you a shot. Similarly, if deer see you but don't think you've seen them, they may stay hidden. If you pass thick bush that may hold a deer, stop and turn around. If there's a deer there that thinks you've spotted it, it may move, giving you a shot. Go extra slow. If you are "still hunting", most people don't go slow enough. Decide on a period of time to stay still. Use your watch so you are not tempted to move too soon. A number of times, I've stopped for a snack or a drink and while stopped, deer have flushed while I wasn't prepared. When you stop, be prepared.

Still hunting can work well when you are on fresh sign with the wind in your face. This is how some hunters work fresh sign.

Hunt with a friend. Safety first. Wear orange, make a plan and set rules. Decide on "fire zones" for each. Don't fire at a deer that might be between you and your partner. Wait until it gets to a safe firing zone or has solid ground behind it. If you are not 100% sure, don't shoot.

1. Position one hunter downwind on an escape route. The other hunter moves upwind to "push" the deer out of their cover
2. "One high, one low". Hunt parallel to each other, one high on a ridge the other low. If one of you puts up a deer, if you don't get a shot, your mate might.

Sit and Wait. If you know where the deer feed or find a wallow or rub tree or wild cherry tree (sambar love wild cherry trees) you might want to plan a "sit and wait" over it. Where there is hunting pressure, deer generally feed at night. Look for game trails going down to farm land or other feeding areas. If you follow the game trail away from the feeding area (usually uphill), you may find a spot where deer move to ahead of last light where they wait until its dark. Look for lots of droppings 200 – 500 m away from the feeding area. This is where some people like to "sit and wait" from about 3:00pm to last light. Some people like to use camo net or a hide to help conceal themselves, others don't bother. A few (bow hunters especially) might use a tree stand. No one I know uses a tree stand, but some use a camo net blind.

In your scouting, you found a wallow. Check the wallow mid-morning. If it was used overnight, there's a reasonable chance a deer is bedded 800m or so above it and it will use the wallow that evening. You could set up a hide for late afternoon, planning shooting lanes and low impact access routes, keeping the wind in mind.

Don't "scent up" the area you want to hunt in. But if there are a number of gullies or game trails the deer could use, you might "scent up" places you won't sit in to try to divert the deer to the trail you are waiting on. One way of scenting up an area that lasts longer than just walking through it is to urinate in it.

Driving Deer Solo. This is something I read in Outdoor Life magazine (online) and admit I haven't tried it as such, but backtracking my steps returning to camp I have seen deer which must have seen me and returned after I passed. So, I think it's a tactic worth trying. Hunting alone, walk through an area you think has deer with the wind at your back. You may get a shot. Otherwise, it may stir up deer and move them. Then make a circle and walk through again. If you don't see a deer, move to the edge of the area you moved through and wait an hour or two. You might see deer moving back thinking the danger has passed.

Random Tips & Questions

So, you want a stag? Deer are not particularly bothered by a gun shot. To them, it may sound like a tree cracking and branch falling. I've seen sambar look up at the sound of a shot in the next gully then go back browsing. But it's said, "*If you want to shoot a trophy stag, you have to stop shooting hinds*". When you shoot a hind, your hunt is basically over for the day as you have to deal with the animal you just shot. And by shooting the hind, you may have just missed the opportunity of the stag that was following 5 or 10 minutes behind. Errol Mason (in *Secrets of the Sambar*) says stags often follow hinds. So, if you see a hind and your freezer is already nearly full, wait and see if a stag is following.

How slow should I go? My mate Jorgie shoots a lot of sambar. He says if you are not seeing deer, you are not moving fast enough. He moves quickly through areas where there is no sign and slows right down when there is fresh sign. He hunts high on the ridge looking for them in their resting areas. Alternatively, Errol Mason writes if you are on the same face as the sambar, you are "in their face". Another tactic is to work along the south/west face of a ridge, glassing the opposite north/east face (where the deer will prefer to be) looking for them in their beds. Errol says taking about an hour to move 1 km is about the right pace.

Should I follow tracks? The tracks will need to be very fresh. Have any leaves fallen on them? Have they been rained on and when was the last rain? Has any grass or vegetation stepped on recovered? If the tracks are splayed, the deer was trotting or running and there's no point following them. However if the tracks are very fresh (you see fresh pellets/droppings) – and – the wind is good – and- you can move quietly, then yes try following. But move very slowly, the deer may be very close.

Dear Diary. Keep a journal of your hunts. Deer are creatures of habits and keeping a note of when and where you saw them and what the weather was like helps you pattern their behaviour in that area. The more you know an area the better you will be able to hunt it.

A picture is worth 1,000 words. Take a camera. Most phones have pretty good cameras on them these days. If you get your deer, you'll want some photos. If you don't get a deer, you may still want photos of the wallow and rub tree you found, or of that spectacular sunset. Here's a few tips for better photos:

- Respect the deer. Don't take pictures of excessive blood or of the deer's tongue hanging out. Make sure your rifle is not only safe but looks safe in the picture (i.e. bolt open)
- Lighting. An overhead sun can make harsh shadows, best lighting is when the sun is lower. Look for interesting shadows. If it's dark, shine a couple of headlamps on the subject from different angles.
- Trophies and portraits. Avoid using the zoom. Zoom all the way out for a wide angle and get in close. Try to get a low angle (sit or lie down) to get more of the background or sky into the picture.

- Check the background. What else is in the frame? Do you need to move any items you don't want in the picture or is a different angle better?

Concealment (of you and the deer)

The "S's" of Concealment.

If you've had any army service (at least infantry; I'm not sure if the Armored Corps worry too much about concealment), you may remember the "S's of concealment". Think about them for yourself as a hunter and when looking for the hunted.

☐ Shape

This is where camo clothing comes in. It's the disruptive pattern more than the colour that helps break up your shape. But hunting sambar, remember they are colour blind with poor acuity, but hunters are not. Red checks or blaze break-up patterns are a good option to break up your shape to deer be visible to other hunters. If your blaze hat is solid orange, get a permanent marker and draw a fern leaf or random pattern on it to break up the shape.

To see sambar before they see you, it helps to look for shape. Not many things in the bush are horizontal. A deer's back is. The curve of the rump or neck sometimes gives them away. Don't look for a whole deer.

☐ Shine

Your hands, face, and rifle barrel will "shine". Try covering your barrel with tape or a gun sock. Wear a facemask or veil or camo makeup. Some rub charcoal from the campfire on their face. Or try burning the end of a wine bottle cork and rubbing that on your face. And wear gloves. Your hands shine or reflect UV light too.

When it's cold, deer like to catch some sunshine in the morning. What you might see first is a shining nose or some shine on a polished rack of antlers. See something shiny? Check it out with your binoculars.

Don't wash your hunting clothes with fabric brightening detergents. These have UV reflectors that some say make them "shine" like a beacon to deer.

☐ Silhouette

Don't stand on a ridgeline or against something where you stick out like dogs' proverbials. If you're in dark-coloured clothes, don't stand in front of a pale granite boulder. Don't hunt along the top of a ridgeline, hunt a little below it.

You'll rarely ever see a sambar out in the open. However, I have frequently seen fallow bucks silhouetted on a hill. Perhaps they knew it wasn't a safe shot for me to take!

☐ Sudden Movement

Don't make any. We can pick up movement quite well. Deer are better at it.

Sometimes, it's the flick of a sambar ear you will see first. If there's light to medium rain (deer usually take shelter in heavy rain) you may see a sambar shake water off their coat.

☐ Shadow

Don't make one, stand in them. You may not be seen, but your shadow might be.

Where there are open clearings, sambar may be in the cover of shadows off to the side. Look with your binoculars.

☐ Sounds

Mostly, you're likely only going to hear a sambar once it's aware of you. You might hear it move away from you or you might get honked. A sambar's honk might make you jump out of your skin. This is what it's trying to do, to make you move so it can tell what you are. If you don't react but stay still and quiet for a while, it may go back to doing whatever it was doing.

Errol Mason (author of "Secrets of the Sambar") says sambar have "bionic" hearing. He says he's seen sambar react to the sound of a camera shutter at 80m and react at 450m to people speaking in low quiet tones.

Some noises sound natural in the bush, some don't. Make sure none of your gear squeaks or makes metallic clicks or clunks. Collapsible water bottles or camelbacks are quieter than water sloshing around in a half full bottle. In the infantry reserves, we weren't allowed a partially full water bottle. It had to be completely full or completely empty.

Because its hearing is one of its best defensive senses, deer like to bed down in "quiet zones". About $\frac{3}{4}$ the way up a slope you may find a zone where it's quiet; no birds, no wind movement. This is where they like to be because it helps them hear any approaching danger. When you find yourself in a "quiet zone", switch on and look for deer.

☐ Spacing

The spacing or rhythm of sound is important. Obviously, be as quiet as possible. If you break a loud stick underfoot, freeze and wait. Move like a bush critter. Animals in the bush make noise, but only humans walk with regular spaced steps. Walk like a deer that takes a few steps, stops to maybe eat something or just stops and listens.

Sometimes it's the legs of deer you might spot. 4 legs with symmetrical spacing can stand out in the bush; small saplings don't grow like that.

If you are moving closer to a deer you've spotted or getting into a position for a clear shot, take a tip from a bowhunter, take very short steps. As you walk, the space between your legs (no between your lower legs!) shifts from light (legs apart) to dark (legs together) which may alert the animal you are stalking. Take short steps so there's no visible open space between your legs.

☐ Smell

Sambar's sense of smell is better than ours, but even people can at times smell what we are hunting; you can smell where a fox has been, you can smell a mob of goats.

Hunt with the wind in your face or from the side. Be aware of the wind and thermals that could carry your scent to the deer.

Put some gum leaves in your bag with your hunting clothes to impart a bit of natural scent. Avoid wearing your hunting clothes in camp or while you are travelling to avoid scenting them up. And wash them with scent free detergent.

Use the wind.

If you listen to podcasts or watch USA videos on hunting, you'll probably have noticed USA hunting is a bit different from our hunting. One podcast I recently heard said typical white-tail deer hunting in eastern USA involves hunting out of a stand (where they have apples, carrots, acorns etc to attract deer) for a couple of hours in the morning, going home or back to the camp and going back to their stand for sunset. Many hunters may have more than one stand, and which one they chose depends on the wind. They say wind will affect the direction from which deer approach the stand and the free feed hunters put out (but unless you're a Greens or a socialist, you'll know there's no such thing as a "free lunch"!)

Duck hunters also will pick where they set up decoys according to the wind. Wind affects where ducks want to be; they will land into the wind and prefer the sheltered shorelines. Good duck hunters will choose where they hunt according to the wind.

Hunt according to the wind, the wind should decide where and what direction you hunt; where you are likely to find deer is affected by the wind. Especially in cold weather, deer will prefer slopes that face the morning sun (facing North, the ridge running East-West). They will also prefer to have the wind behind them and to be high on the slope where it gets the sun's first rays and where there's an eddy in the wind currents and from where they can see what's coming in front of them and smell what's behind them.



Find this place within a couple of Km of feeding area and you will likely find deer.

Hunting at right angles to the wind (which may mean contouring at the same elevation) you may have a chance of approaching a deer without them seeing or smelling you.

Whichever way you hunt, you need to hunt with the wind in mind. But you won't know what the wind is doing without using a wind indicator. People use a variety of things to help indicate the wind including:

- A feather or some strands of fibre attached to the muzzle or bow tip can help (but can also get tangled in scrub)
- The flame of a cigarette lighter will indicate the wind.
- You can buy commercial wind indicators, powder in a little puffer bottle. But you can also make your own with a plastic bottle (like a small sauce bottle with a small nozzle). Fill it with builders' chalk or corn flour or baking powder. One member on Facebook says he fills a container with ash from the campfire.
- Feathers or fibre. You can carry some feathers (pigeon or wood duck breast feathers I think are good) or some tufts of fibre (Earthwool™ insulation fibres are

biodegradable). These can float on the wind and be visible for a long distance, indicating if the wind changes direction a little distance from you.

If there is no detectable wind, there will still be air movement carrying your smell somewhere. When air is cooling (evening) it gets more dense and heavier and drifts downhill. As air warms (mornings) it generally drifts uphill. Get in the habit of checking wind direction as it can change. Not only might the prevailing wind change, but it can swirl around. Think of water currents in a river. There can be backwater and eddies where the water flow swirls around and back upstream.

If the wind carries your scent to the deer, expect them to move. Check the wind. The wind may be doing something where you are standing, but something different along the gully.

The last point about the wind is it can be fickle, changing directions. If the wind changes on you, don't give up. Adjust your hunting plan if you can but otherwise keep hunting, all is not lost. You can always try backtracking. Deer may have moved out of your way and circled around back to where they were. There's a good chance if you disturbed a deer on the way in, but didn't alarm it, it will be there again when you return.

Use Binoculars

DO NOT use the scope of your rifle to check out an object you're not sure of. The extra movement may alert any deer that may be close by, you won't have the same field of view, your arms will get tired holding the weight of your rifle while you check out objects, and if one of those objects happens to be another person, they will not appreciate you pointing a rifle at them. It's not safe.

Binoculars will help you see *through* the bush. Apart from magnifying things, the selective focus blurs out what you don't want to see and makes clear the spots you want to check out. These will help you see deer before they see you.

Most experienced hunters don't use the standard neck strap the binoculars come with. Those can give you a tired neck. Instead, consider either a pouch worn like a chest pack or an elasticated back harness. The pouch gives you extra waterproofing from rain, but I think isn't as convenient as a harness.

My First Sambar

I'd been in camp with a couple of FGA mates. The first day was non-stop solid rain. In spite of the weather, we were full of anticipation, like kids the day before Christmas. We knew the sambar would be sheltering from the rain the same as us and when it stopped raining, I hoped they would be hungry and moving.

Day 2 and with a break in the rain, my first hunt for the trip started directly out of camp. The forest close was quite thick, perhaps an average 20 yards visibility, but sign was everywhere. It was almost impossible to take a step without stepping on deer droppings, particularly in some gullies or occasional grassy flats. I climbed a few hundred feet altitude towards the top of the ridge to find the "zone" and loop back to where I started.

Fred Bear used to say nothing clears a troubled mind like shooting a bow. I think nothing clears the mind like hunting in the forest's "zone". Right here is where I stop for a rest and soak in the bush, surveying the country below me and enjoying the quiet and the forest scents of wet eucalyptus and take a moment to thank God for all my blessings.

Serious “walking them up” hunting starts when seeing very fresh sign in this zone. “Move slowly and look a lot”. It's taken me a while to learn this in spite of being told many times. I guess I just had to learn by doing. Until I had watched a sambar unaware of me, I didn't realise how slow they move. In half an hour, it moved only 100 yards as it took a step and a bite of browse here or there; stopping, listening, looking. I need a bit of self-discipline to slow down. “Honk”! This time, as usual, I was seen first. Sometimes I'll get a glimpse of it before vanishing into the bush, leaving me with goose-bumps and hair standing up on the back of my neck.

The next day, one of my mates, Jake was “first in best dressed” to hunt another gully behind camp at first light. To be fair, he asked us each to go with him, but knowing that his chances were better hunting solo, and with the attraction of a warm bed and a sleep in, he was on his own. He waited behind the tree-line overlooking a grassy gully as darkness lifted. The rest of us looked up over the fire and espresso coffees at the sound of his 28 Nosler. Turning on the UHF radio, he'd shot an animal on the opposite tree-line, about 200m. After finishing coffee, a couple of us started up the hill to help carry out his deer.

It didn't take long to find a short blood trail and a “snack pack” at the end of it. I shared a feeling of satisfaction from helping bring venison into camp, even if it wasn't my shot. That afternoon, there'd be more venison and antlers in camp. I'd get my animal later. At the end of the week, we had six deer from five hunters. The best stag carried 23” antlers, taken in “the zone”

My deer was shot in the late afternoon, but otherwise was a cross gully shot similar to Jake's first snack pack. I had seen sambar here on an earlier hunt and decided on an afternoon “sit and wait”. I had a comfortable sitting position behind a large fallen tree, but I wished I'd put in a piece of foam mat to keep my bum dry. To my left, I could see smoke rising from the campfire across the lake and to my front and right, I could glass the gully and the tree-line above it. I checked the distance with a range finder, 200m to the dense trees.

The guys in camp could hear my shot. About an hour later, they joined me in darkness to help with the recovery.

Later in camp we enjoyed eating deer heart (a first for some of us).

Shooting

Sighting in Your Rifle

In my own experience and talking to others, it seems most sambar are taken at under 100m. Some like to sight in rifles at 100m, so the bullet is very close to the cross hairs at shorter ranges. Sighted in like this, the bullet will be about 75mm/3” low at 175m. Any range over 175m you would need to adjust your aiming point, i.e., aim high.

It may have been the late Jack O'Connor (Shooting Editor of Outdoor Life Magazine) who first wrote about Maximum Point-Blank Range (MPBR). This is the range where you can aim direct on big game and have the bullet in your target zone. For a deer rifle, Jack reckoned the target zone was a 6 inch, or 150mm circle. Using 308W factory loads (168g Ballistic Silvertips) as an example, when the bullet is 3” high at about 100m, it should be spot on at about 200m and 3” low at 240m. So, if a deer is anywhere up to 240m away, just aim straight at where you want to hit it and you'll be in the 150mm/6” target zone. Sighted in like this, at 300m aim a bit high, at the shoulder.

At distances over 300m, hold over starts to become important. At longer ranges you need to be able to reliably estimate distances. You'll need a rangefinder. If you're going to take a long-range shot, you should first put in a lot of range work so you can ethically take a long-range shot with confidence.

If you only have a 100m range to sight in on and to practice, some (me) find it more convenient to sight so the bullet is 50mm high at 100m. To work out MPBR, you'll need to play around with some ballistic programs. There are a lot of phone apps, some are free. I'd suggest one that works offline (out of mobile phone coverage).

Taking the Shot

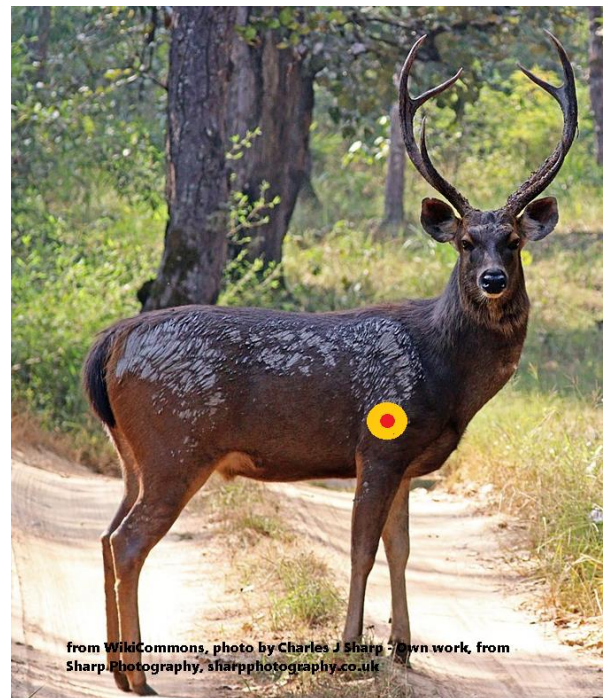
I clearly remember my first shot at a fallow deer at about 40m. I used to shoot club 3-Position target competition and while I never won any trophies, I reckon I'm still a reasonable offhand shot. But at that moment, adrenaline was pumping so hard, it was all I could do just to keep the sights on the body of the animal, let alone the heart/lung area. Using a lot of will power and some deep breaths, I managed to squeeze off a shot that took out the top of the heart. A perfect shot with a 308W, 150 grain Hornady Interlock that went through and through, but the doe still ran/staggered about 100m!

GMA recommend the heart-lung area of a deer is the most ethical shot. Any good hunting bullet of the legal minimum size put into this area will kill a deer quickly. Aim for about 1/3 up from the bottom of the chest, in line with the front leg.

You should aim at a particular spot, not a general area. "Aim small, miss small".

Don't aim for the head. While that's the recommended shot for kangaroos, a deer's brain is quite small and if the bullet is a little off its mark, it can cause fatal injuries and a lost deer. And if it's a stag, you risk damaging the antlers.

GMA advice is, "*The broadside shot is preferred*". If the animal is quartering away, aim on hitting the chest at an angle such that the bullet will hit (if it penetrates) the opposite side front leg. If it's quartering towards you, aim at the front of the near front leg. The objective is to have the bullet go through the centre of the heart/lung area. If the animal is head on, aim at the centre of the chest to hit vital organs. If the deer is going directly away, (sometimes called the "Texas Heart Shot"), there is no ethical shot. Don't shoot.



If you see a deer but it's walking away, try yelling "hey" or whistling or blowing a deer call. It may very well make the deer pause long enough for you to get a clean shot.

Don't expect an easy shot at deer, even if it's an easy shot! Practice. Then practice some more! Good practice for field shooting is a 22 rimfire, offhand. And practice some rapid fire with your deer rifle. And at home, practice proper mounting of the rifle to build muscle memory. After checking and double checking the rifle is unloaded and the muzzle is in a

safe direction, practice squeezing the trigger. Get to know the feel of it and when it goes “click”, practice rapid cycling of the bolt and squeezing the trigger again. You’re building muscle memory.

When you shoot, keep shooting

If you’re like me and have shot a lot of targets or small game, your natural tendency after a shot is to look for where the shot landed and look for what’s going on. How was the follow through? Was the shot good? Where was the deer hit? Is it going down? Wrong reaction! Put another shot in the vitals (heart/lung). And another. Reload fast and shoot again until the animal goes down. The idea of a “one shot” kill is for Hollywood. Your first shot may be perfect, but sambar stags are big animals. Even if you are shooting a “458 Fire and Brimstone”, if it’s on its feet, shoot it again. A deer with a perfect heart/lung shot can still travel 100m and 100m is a long way in the bush. Keep shooting until it’s down.

After the shot

It’s quite possible the deer will drop in its tracks like it’s been electrocuted but it’s also possible it will run off. If it runs, the deer’s body language may indicate where it was hit. If it doesn’t give any indication, don’t assume a miss. A hit deer will usually react more to the shot than if it’s missed. Any sort of erratic movement would indicate a hit.

- A heart-shot deer might jump and/or kick its back legs before running some distance.
- A lung-shot deer may run on impact or just stand there.
- Gut-shot deer may hunch up and walk or trot away in a humped-up posture.

Unless heavy rain is likely to wash away tracks or a blood trail, don’t be in a rush to follow it up. In the old days, advice was to have 2 cigarettes first, even if you saw it go down. If the deer is dead, it’s not going anywhere. If it’s not, let it lie down to die. If you rush in, it will keep moving. Mark the spot where you took the shot (this is the other reason you have toilet paper in your day pack) and make a note of where the deer was when you shot it and when you last saw it.

If you think the shot is good, wait 10 minutes. If the hit is behind the lungs, wait an hour. If the deer ran off, mark the spot it was hit and look for a blood trail. Be careful not to walk over any tracks. I’ve had fallow deer dead within 15m of where it was hit that were as hard to see as quail in a stubble paddock. Don’t lose your starting points, mark them with toilet paper and mark any tracks and blood signs. Be prepared to get on all fours and track. Carefully move grass and leaves to look at the soil underneath. Splayed and/or overlapping footprints are signs of a hit. If you can’t find the deer, mark the last bit of sign and save the GPS co-ordinates and get help if it’s available. Even if it’s the next day, do your best to find it. You owe it to the deer.

When you approach your deer, make sure it’s dead. Especially if it has antlers on it that could do you an injury. Look for signs of breathing and any eye reflex.

I read an account in Outdoor Life or Field and Stream or somewhere or other, about a first-time hunter asking another what to do with the whitetail he’d just shot. He was told “*why the f#ck are you shooting an animal if you don’t know what to do with it!*” If it’s a small animal not too far from a road or camp, you might gut it and take the whole carcass out. To do that, take some care not to open the stomach contents, but cut open the belly and cut around the anus. Get your arms up into the chest and cut around the diaphragm and pull out all the guts, heart and lungs. When you get it somewhere more convenient, you can hang it from a

tree and butcher it like a sheep. Bigger animals, (most sambar) are too large for this and the better option is to break it down in the bush. You'll want a "kill kit" (see the Day Packs section). The idea is to take off the legs, fillet the backstraps and the "scotch fillet" (muscles along the inside of the spine), leaving the guts inside the frame/ribs of the animal. Work on one side then roll the animal over to the other side. If you are on a steep slope, tie the animal to a tree so it can't slide or roll down the hill. And some cord to hold legs apart can help. That's why a length of cord is in the "kill kit".

You can find videos demonstrating breaking down a deer on YouTube.

Briefly, get your knife under the skin to cut from underneath the hide (you'll blunt the blade cutting the fur from the outside) cut along the back of the spine and fillet out the backstraps. The inside fillets can also be cut out without removing the animal's paunch. The bones of the front shoulders are not attached by any sockets, but just ligaments and tissue. Cut around the natural form of the muscles and hide (keeping the skin on to help keep the meat clean) and the front legs will come away. The hind legs are more securely attached to the pelvis and more tendons and tissue need to be cut to remove them. Keep the skin on the rump to help keep the meat clean. It's possible to keep the skin connecting both rear legs intact so you can carry both legs like saddle bags. If the animal isn't big, that may help with a carry out. With a large animal, 2 legs together may be a bit too heavy to want to do that. It's not difficult.

If you have a stag on the grass, you'll want the antlers or the head. If you want to mount the head, you'll need to cape it out. You'll need to skin the beast from behind the front shoulders and off the head. Cut along the back (top) of the neck so when it gets stitched back up it's less visible. Carefully skin the head. There's a special tool for the ears, if you don't have one, take the whole ear. Take care with the eye lids, lips and take the whole nose. Even if you shoot a hind, if you have time, you might practice skinning the head so you have a better idea what you are doing when you get a stag worth mounting. If you can't get to a demonstration, YouTube is your friend.

If you only want the antlers, you'll need to saw the skull. Carry out what meat you can and make a return trip with a saw to recover the antlers and more meat. I have a saw in my camp or vehicle, not my daypack. Alternatively, you can carry a vet's embryo saw aka wire saw. These are light weight and will cut through bone. You can find them on Ebay.

Why Do We Miss?

The trigger "broke", releasing the sear, letting the firing pin drop, striking the primer. This took maybe 6 milliseconds, the lock time of a Howa, but all I knew was one instant I had pressure on the trigger, the next I was whacked by the recoil. It felt like a good shot from a solid rest on a large log with padding under the rifle stock and crosshairs steady on the deer's heart. A second later when my eye and the scope were aligned again, I couldn't see the deer. I've seen deer vanish into the bush before. Could this be my first deer on the ground or could it have vanished?

I like reading and re-reading Jack O'Connor. Jack was editor of Outdoor Life and something of a guru. Jack said it's only human nature to exaggerate and embellish. It's also human to not count your misses and forget them. But Jack said he always strove to be honest writing about his hunting. My deer dropped where it stood. But being honest, I didn't hit where I was aiming; the bullet hit high and took out a number of vertebrae. It would be easy to say I aimed there, but I'd aimed at the heart. It was a bad shot. I might have been lucky the deer

wasn't wounded. The deer may have been unlucky it wasn't a clean miss. But it was a kill and I was very happy to have my first sambar on the grass and very happy to be bringing my own venison home.

Since returning from this trip, I've had a chance to shoot this rifle again and I'm still not 100% certain why I missed the heart by so much. Why do we miss?

Some of reasons for our misses are: sight alignment; trigger control; flinching; "*Buck Fever*". It wasn't any of these for me. I had a very steady rest and had my pulse and breathing under control having watched this deer for a long time, waiting for him to move into a clear broadside position. The cure for sight alignment and trigger control is to practice, practice, practice. To cure a flinch, always shoot with hearing protection and maybe shoot a milder recoiling gun. Buck fever can happen to everyone from time to time. If the crosshairs flit around the target like a moth around a light, you can get more control by becoming a better offhand marksman. More time at the range helps, especially if you add a bit of pressure and nerves with a bit of friendly competition.

Other things that can cause misses are: mixing different brands or weights of ammunition; shooting steeply downhill; scope not zeroed; or cleaning the bore. Most rifles shoot different weight bullets or different brands to different points of impact. So, if you change your ammunition you need to re-sight in the rifle. If you shoot a long distance down a steep hill, you may shoot high. This wasn't my issue. But did my scope get knocked? Had I cleaned the bore and not fired a fouling shot? The first shot through a clean barrel can often be a "flier", shooting high. When I checked the rifle's zero at the range, it was spot on from a cold barrel.

Another reason for missing is shooting through bushes, leaves or even long grass. It doesn't matter the calibre, bullet weight or shape, all bullets can deflect off a twig or blade of grass. Was this it? I had waited and waited for my deer to move into a clear line of sight. But was it clear? In fading light, were there some small sticks I didn't see?

Several people have done bullet deflection tests. One was written up in *Outdoor Life* (29 May 2014). In that test with a 308W, 25-06 and 223 Rem, both hunting and target bullets were shot through sticks and also long grass. Every bullet deflected. Some bullets tumbled. The average deflection was about 100mm at 45m. 50 years earlier, Jack O'Connor did a similar test to compare round nose bullets to spitzer pointed bullets with similar results. All bullets can deflect off vegetation. Avoid shooting through vegetation.

Why was my bullet off target? I don't know, but my best guess is that it hit a twig before it got to the deer.

Fallow Deer

Some animals benefit from human activity. It's said, due to permanent water and improved pastures, there are more kangaroos now than 200 years ago. Fallow deer are another species that does well around agriculture.

There's no closed season on fallow in Victoria, but the best time to get a buck with good antlers is in the rut, said to start a couple of weeks after the first full moon in Autumn. Both fallow and red deer rut at this time. The Rut (from the Latin rugire, meaning "to roar") is the breeding season and bucks are more aggressive, fight other bucks (and will respond to the sound of antlers rattling) and are less wary and easier to hunt. Sambar don't have a set rutting season. The autumn equinox is the traditional start to the hunting season in Europe (even though we don't have a closed season on deer).



Bucks are on the chase for does in oestrus (heat) and will compete with each other. At this time calls that mimic an oestrus doe bleat or a buck's grunt can attract a buck. So too can the sound of antlers clashing together, the sound of bucks competing for dominance. If you spot a doe during the rut, it often means a buck is nearby.

- Don't over use the rattles and use the other calls first. Rattling is more aggressive than calls and not all bucks are looking for a fight. If you watch a video of bucks fighting, they spend most of the time with antlers locked and not making a lot of sound. There are only intermittent antler rattles. Also try picking up a stick and beating a sapling with it.
- Use the right call at the right time. In the pre rut, a doe bleat may attract a buck, but full into the rut, he's only interested in a doe ready to mate. Use the oestrus bleat.
- Use two buck grunt/croak call, one for a young buck (use that more often, 4:1) than the mature buck grunt. The sound of a young buck will piss off a rutting buck and bring him in. Sometimes a doe bleat followed by a buck's grunt will work. I'm told to make 2 doe bleats at a time.
- Don't overdo the calls. Doing a sit and wait, some say call about every 10—15 minutes, other say about every 30 minutes. Give 3 to 4 grunts. If you see a buck out of range, give one or two longer loud grunts to get his attention. If you get his attention, give a series of quick soft grunts (the sound a buck makes mating).

Bucks will follow game trails looking for oestrus does. Set up overlooking a well-used game trail between a bedding and feeding area

A successful hunter has said he got his bucks by heading out while it was still dark, following the sound of "croaking" bucks until he thought he were reasonably close, then waiting for dawn. When there was enough light to shoot (legal time is 30 minutes before sunrise), try to spot the buck and go stalking.

Tasmanian Fallow Deer Hunting

I've hunted a few times on a large and small properties (not exclusive access, but the two of us were the only ones hunting it at the time) and also on public land. Tas Hydro land and also Sustainable Timber Tasmania land allow hunting. Look up their websites for access. However, I think there's better public land hunting in Victoria and NSW.

The first time I hunted Tassie fallow, I shot 2 does on the first day hunting (day 2 of the trip), in the middle on the day. This was on a large farm with frontage on the South Esk. I think (and others agree) that hunting farmland fallow might have more similarities to hunting rabbits than stalking sambar. However, fallow do have good smell and hearing and see movement well, the same as sambar, so it still takes some skill. For example, one trip to the farm, from the 4WD we saw a buck standing in a field of lucerne. He was probably the best part of a kilometre away, but as soon as the engine stopped and we got out of the car, he was off. Running not walking. Another time, doing a "sit and wait", a buck walked out about 75m from me. He was just slowly walking and grazing and thinking about whatever fallow bucks think about. It was antlerless season, so he was safe from me. But when he moved to where the wind was carrying my scent, he was off at a quick walk.

Get to know your hunting area is important for success. fallow, like most deer, are creatures of habit. If you get to know their range, where they like to be at what time of day, it's relatively easy to get the drop on them and shoot them. Some fallow in the Central Highlands of Tasmania like to rest up in small on-farm pine plantations. I've shot them by stalking there. Look down the rows of the pines and bend down and look under the low branches and it's not too hard to see them. Then put in a stalk. Then shoot. But you'll have the most "luck" if you put in the leg work to get to know their range and movements.

When it's not deer season or they don't otherwise have hunting pressure, you can often see fallow in paddocks. When there is a bit of hunting pressure, they might rest in low "dead" ground where they are hidden from predators' line of sight or otherwise rest in some other cover. They'll move in natural corridors, like gullies or bush or scrub connecting their resting and feeding areas. These are good places to hunt. The key is to get to know the property and what the deer's habits are like, then you can be in the right place at the right time.

My first fallow was on a farm in Victoria. The tricky bit there was moving through paddocks without large mobs of kangaroos bounding off and telegraphing my presence. I thought about sleeping out in a swag to get around that problem. But one day, walking above a creek gully (a natural corridor for the deer) to where I wanted to be, I unexpectedly bumped into a doe about 30m from me. We both just stood there looking at each other, equally surprised. After what seemed to be several minutes but was probably only a few seconds, I slowly, very slowly, closed the bolt and raised the 308 and tried hard to keep the crosshairs on the body, not just the heart lung area. With willpower overcoming "buck fever" I got the shot off. A perfect heart shot. After checking she was dead, I unloaded and started walking back for the ute. (I forgot to say, fallow on private property are also very easy to recover). I hadn't gone far when I bumped another doe, with an empty rifle. We just looked at each other for a minute before she calmly walked off.

Tasmania public land hunting is a different proposition. Sustainable Timber Tasmania manages timber production zones that in Victoria would be called State Forests. Some of them (not all) are open to hunting. It seems to me most of the ones open to hunting have nothing to hunt in them, except a few wallabies. Wallabies are everywhere in Tassie and have a full year season. Some forests are managed by Tas Hydro and there are also "Conservation Zones". Some of the Tas Hydro and Conservation Zones allow hunting, with hunters either going into a ballot (like Big Den) at a nominal cost for keys or otherwise booking a ticket for a week, similar to the NSW State Forests system, at no cost.

Most of Tasmania's forests seem to be pretty rugged and not very fertile. Many are very rocky with little or no topsoil and in the central highlands they get snow. In my limited experience, these forests are not where the fallow want to be. And if they were there, the

bush is so thick in most parts you'd never see them! You can find them in the foothills, adjacent to farms. But public access to those areas is generally very limited, unless you are on friendly terms with the farmer.

Where my son and I had success in a Conservation Zones, was in the lower gullies leading to a natural corridor into farmland. The country here looks very similar to the Strathbogies in Victoria and hunting is similar. We did a 12km round trip on foot to get to a spot I liked on Google Earth. It was one of these gullies running into farmland. We planned on a sit and wait, but my son spotted a nice snack pack, so we didn't have to do the waiting bit. But it was still a carry out in the dark. In Tassie, you have to keep the head with the carcass and carry all of it out (except the guts). I reckon the law makers think everyone can drive a ute up to the kill. Fortunately for me, my son played rugby #5 (middle of the scrum), trains "cross-fit" and hikes up mountains carrying 30kg weights just for fun. I did the gutting-out, he did the carry-out.

A well-known area is "Big Den". This is a balloted hunt and up to about 40 balloted hunters can be in the area at one time. At the entrance to Big Den, there's a register of hunters and of how many animals are sighted and how many shot. Not many are sighted and much fewer are shot. This seems to be a low odds area to hunt. One side of Big Den borders farmland and it seems most Taswegians hunt Big Den by standing at the side of the road on a game trail leading from the farms. When the fallow are hunted on farms below, if they "co-operate", they move up into Big Den forest.

And finally, a word on killing fallow. Being smaller and "softer" than sambar, they are not hard to kill. Apart from a spine shot, I've never had a "bang flop". Even unalarmed with a heart shot, they can still travel a bit before they drop. "Old Mate", Bruce Bertram (Bertram Bullets) says fallow are very susceptible to high velocity, hydrostatic shock. I've wounded one with a 22-250 and killed them with a 243W, 308W and 30-06. Forgetting the 22-250 (not legal in Victoria or Tasmania), they all seemed to react the same. With one exception, all bullets exited and (apart from a couple of spine shots) all went about 10-50m before dropping. The one bullet that didn't exit was a 130 grain Hornady varmint bullet out of a 308W at short range and going as fast as a 308W can go. I'd read on a USA forum that these were fast killers of whitetail deer. It made a mess of the heart/lungs, but still didn't produce a "bang-flop". I only used that bullet the one time. I like to get an exit wound and I'd like to be confident that if I hit the shoulder, the bullet will still get good penetration.

Joseph von Benedikt ("JvB", one of my favourite gun writers) says, you don't always get the opportunity for a perfectly placed shot and sometimes the bullet may be deflected by a twig or long grass you didn't see. So JvB advises, use a cartridge that hits with "authority", and with a bullet that can drive through a shoulder or leg bone into the vitals, or penetrate deeper if a quartering shot is your only option. While a 243 is ok, I think my sambar rifle isn't too much gun for fallow and given a choice, I'd use a 30 calibre over a 6mm. If you want lower recoil, you could look to one of the 30 calibre 125 grain hunting bullets (not varmint bullets) or a 7mm. My fallow loads are the 170 grain Bertram Bullet in 308W and 30-06. They are good and accurate bullets. As a "cup and core" bullet, it will expand faster than a stronger premium bonded bullet, my editorial if not expert view is, they are the better pick for the smaller fallow deer. And for me they don't damage as much meat as something like Hornady's SST or Nosler's Accubond. In a factory bullet, any of the standard hunting bullets recommended for deer should be good.

APPENDIX 1. Deer Hunting & Motorcycle Maintenance

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (by Robert Pirsig) was a best-selling book, but it wasn't really about motorcycle maintenance, rather thinking about things on a higher level. Pirsig says that knowledge doesn't exist in a vacuum but all knowledge is interconnected. To be a good motorcycle mechanic, you need an understanding of engineering and mechanics, and that requires some knowledge of physics, chemistry and metallurgy. Physics leads to astrophysics to astronomy and that leads to having some knowledge of Zen. And Zen leads to a peaceful state of mind, necessary when working on complex and intricate machinery. Everything is interconnected.

Similarly, to be a good deer hunter, you need some knowledge of deer physiology and biology and their diet and habits. That leads to some knowledge of botany, meteorology and astronomy (moon phases if nothing else). And this, as Robert Pirsig wrote, can ultimately lead to a knowledge of Zen or other spirituality. From spirituality comes morality and from morality comes ethics (Saint Hubertus, the patron saint of hunters, is said to be the first person to promote ethics in hunting). All knowledge is interconnected.

Rodney Carter, Dja Dja Wurrung CEO says, "Hunting, as an experience, is very important to us as a way to stay connected to Country, to put Traditional Ecological Knowledge into practice, and to honour our reliance on Culture and Country for our sustenance".

For me, there's also a spiritual element, as there is for aborigines. An Australian Law Reform Commission report says of (aboriginal) hunting, it ... **"offers a venue through which certain men can and do display concern for the belief system ..."**.¹ And for me, camping with mates and telling stories around a fire establishes a community connection; making and renewing friendships and passing on knowledge and traditions. Hunting connects me to the bush. As someone or other has said (might have been Steve Rinella?), as a bushwalker you are an *observer of nature* whereas a *hunter is a part of nature*. As Steve Rinella (Meat Eater) says:

"Maybe stalking the woods is as vital to the human condition as playing music or putting words to paper. Maybe hunting has as much of a claim on our civilized selves as anything else. After all, the earliest forms of representational art reflect hunters and prey. While the arts were making us spiritually viable, hunting did the heavy lifting of not only keeping us alive, but inspiring us. To abhor hunting is to hate the place from which you came, which is akin to hating yourself in some distant, abstract way."

I feel, like Aborigines, hunting a part of my being, my spirituality. It brings me closer to God.

"When a hunter is in a treestand with moral values and with the proper hunting ethics and richer for the experience, that hunter is 20 feet closer to God."

– Fred Bear, founder of Bear Archery.

We are living in a post-Christian era, as parts of the community move away from traditional spiritual beliefs, some move towards the new-age, zeitgeist or alternative spirituality including wicca and pagan nature worship and ethical veganism. Mainstream religion is incompatible with an alternative belief that humans have no more entitlement to life than any other animal. According to Peter Singer (Animal Liberation), killing new born babies is ok

¹ Australian Law Reform Commission Report 31, Recognition of Aboriginal Customary Laws, Para 882

but using animals or animal product such as butter or honey is based on “speciesism” and akin to racism or slavery. According to Animal Liberation, animals as sentient beings have more rights than human babies!

What is the place of humans in creation? If there’s no God, then we are nothing more than an accident of evolution and life has no meaning. But we evolved as the apex predator, using and eating other critters; evolution designed us to use and eat animals. This is our nature. The alternative is that there is a God, that people have a special place in His creation, and all animals are good to eat (Acts 10:13, “Rise, kill and eat”) and we have dominion over all living things; we were created to manage and use the environment and everything in it.

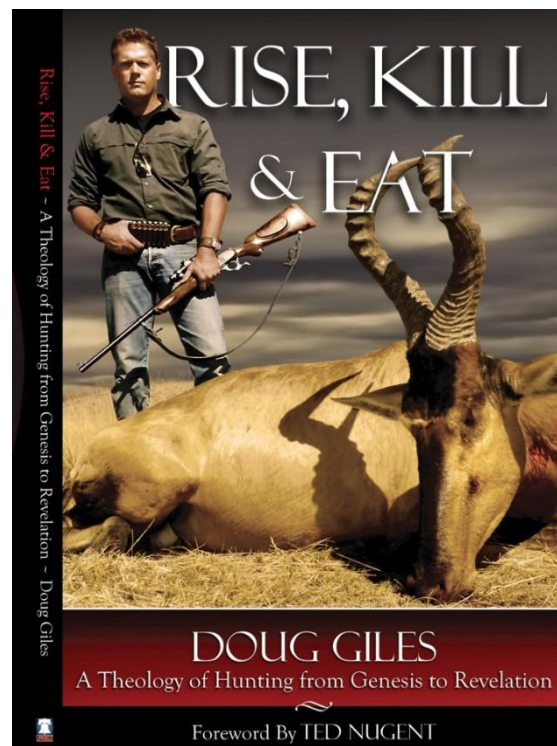
I think hunters can and should take the moral high ground. To me, vegans and animal rights activists are anti-humanity. There’s nothing wrong with ethical hunting or eating meat. It’s not only how we evolved but there are many Bible passages that endorse hunting and eating wild game, particularly deer. God endorses it! (Read the Bible or else read Doug Giles’ book, *“Rise Kill and Eat”*).

Just as hunting is an important element in Aboriginal spirituality, Hunting is part of my spirituality.

Hunting helps restore my soul. It’s hard to star-gaze in the city, but it’s a great part of my hunting. I love sleeping under the stars where “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19). And when I go out to hunt an animal (whether I succeed or not), it’s a reminder to me of my own mortality and that for me to live, something must die. And life is short, I’m going to die. So, I should enjoy life now (Ecc 9:7-10) but live with eternity in view (1 Peter 4:7-11)

As hunters, we rely on a “social licence” to continue to hunt. I feel by demonstrating the positive aspects of hunting and being part of responsible game management and hunting ethically, we can hope to keep that social licence. To me, this includes a spiritual element.

Do you feel that time in the bush helps restore you, restore your soul?



APPENDIX 2. Useful Web Pages

Field and Game Association	www.fieldandgame.com.au
Moroka.30 Moroka.30 TV	www.moroka30.com.au https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCp_bBlq7HhoXkqz4EDWgSZg
GMA - Hunters Guide	http://www.gma.vic.gov.au/education/hunting-guides
Victorian Hunting Maps	Get the "More to Explore" app on your phone or on desktop computer, go to MapShare https://mapshare.vic.gov.au/mapsharevic/
DELWP Bushfire maps	https://www.ffm.vic.gov.au/history-and-incidents/past-bushfires/past-bushfire-maps
DELWP Land zoning	https://maps.land.vic.gov.au/lassi/
VicMap Topographical Maps	https://www.land.vic.gov.au/maps-and-spatial/maps/how-to-access-a-map
Deer + Deer Hunting (USA)	www.deeranddeerhunting.com
Petersens Hunting (USA)	https://www.petersenshunting.com/

And some great Podcasts ...

Backcountry Hunting, by Joseph von Benedikt

Webpage: <https://backcountryhuntingpodcast.net/> Listen on <https://backcountryhunting.libsyn.com/>
JvB is editor of a number of USA hunting and shooting magazines including Petersens Hunting. I find his podcasts laid back and interesting, covering topics like: solo backpack hunting; rifles, calibres and bullets for big game; handling big recoiling rifles, etc.

The MeatEater Podcast.

www.themeateater.com

Steve Rinella and the MeatEater team look at outdoor topics including hunting. These can be a couple of hours long, so are great to download and listen to on long trips or in camp.

Bear Grease

<https://www.themeateater.com/listen/bear-grease>

Another from the MeatEater team. These are shorter than The MeatEater (about an hour) and looks at hunting, human nature and our connection to the land.

... and for something completely different ...

Hounds Tooth Outdoors & the Hounds Tooth Podcast

<https://m.facebook.com/HoundsToothOutdoorsLLC/>

These guys love hunting with dogs, specifically racoon hunting, which is done mostly at night. The podcast is about all sorts of weird and spooky encounters such as UFOs, Bigfoot, ghosts, etc.

The 3 of 7 Project's Podcast.

<https://3of7project.com/podcast/>

Former US Navy Seal, Chadd Wright covers a wide range of topics but they generally relate to challenging the body, mind and spirit (3 of the 7 dimensions of life and wellness) and includes hunting from time to time. Chadd says it's by challenging yourself and imposing adversity in a controlled situation (e.g., hunting), you are more able to deal with challenges and adversity that life throws at you beyond your control.