

ROAR

The Cleaver family is stalking a sika deer. They creep closer, but suddenly, there's a sharp crack. One of them has stood on a twig. Instantly the sika is alert, the white patch on its rump flaring in agitation. It disappears into the bush. There'll be no venison to take home this trip.

by Kathryn Mercer

Birdsong and wild mint

Most of New Zealand's hunters are men, and a lot of these men live in rural areas. This makes Conrad (11), Madison (10), and Jack (8) a bit unusual. These urban kids have been hunting with their dad, Matt, ever since they could walk. The Cleavers don't see themselves as trophy hunters, despite the deer antlers decorating their fence. They shoot only what they can carry, and they harvest every bit of meat. Hunting keeps the family in venison year round, with enough left over to share with friends.

The Cleavers say hunting isn't about killing as many animals as possible. So what is it about? Conrad loves hanging out with his dad and brother and sister. Other things he likes about hunting are the scenery, the fresh air, the sound of birdsong, and the scent of wild mint. Plus, he says, the deer are beautiful to watch, especially the fawns.

Like Conrad, Matt enjoys the outdoors and all the things that come with it. "Coming across a deer is a bonus," he says. Matt's also passionate about the animals he hunts. "Deer are a valuable resource," he says, "and with the proper management, they can be there to be hunted by all New Zealanders."





A hunter's kit

Having the right kit is important. Matt and the kids each carry a pack – travelling light is balanced against being prepared for the worst. Cellphone coverage is usually zilch. Matt takes some gadgets, including a personal locator beacon (PLB). It's battery operated and bright yellow, and all the kids know how to trigger it in an emergency. Luckily, they've never had to do this.

They also carry a couple of GPS navigator/radio handsets. These allow them to split up but still co-ordinate when they're stalking. Jack carries a cow horn to imitate deer calls (although some people play electronic deer recordings or use a piece of plastic pipe).

They take one gun, which has to be supervised by a person over the age of sixteen with a firearms licence. That's Matt. They also have a hunting knife, sleeping bags, spare clothes (often not used!), binoculars, headlamps, and a fishing rod. Huts are few and sometimes full, so the Cleavers also pack a fly to sleep under. They string it up between a couple of trees.



Entertainment comes from a deck of cards and their imaginations. The kids are good at making their own fun: climbing trees, swinging on vines, bouncing on bushes, building huts, having snowball fights, swimming, and catching eels, which are usually released. If they've had a big day, there's always the option of a daytime nap.

Eating out

The family always carries plenty of food and water. They prefer lightweight, freeze-dried meals: mashed potato, smoothies, cheesecake, carrot cake with custard ... these are all reliable and taste pretty good, the kids say. Home-made venison sausages are packed frozen to see them through the first few dinners,

and they always take a chunk of venison salami, also home-made. Finally, there are snacks, muesli, coffee for Matt, and hot-chocolate mix for the kids.

So what are their favourite foods when they're on a trip? "Deer heart!" says Jack. He doesn't need to think this through.

"Fried in garlic butter," Conrad adds.

What about Madison? She likes crackers and smoked cheese, but Jack shakes his head. They all agree that marshmallows taste better toasted over a real fire and not the little gas cooker. And they're all a dab hand at boiling up a brew in the camping billy.





Stealthy

Deer are stealthy, so it helps to be familiar with their habits. Conrad says that one of the animal's biggest assets is a sensitive nose. "If a deer smells you, it's gone. Sometimes, it will even sneak downwind to sniff out danger." One of Conrad's hunting tips is to watch where you put your feet. This isn't just about those snapping twigs. One time, Matt fell down a cliff!

Because of their colour, deer are hard to spot. However, this difficulty works both ways. Deer can only see blues and greens, and hunters take advantage of this. Many dress in camouflage gear, which has patterns that blend in with the bush but also bright colours that a deer can't see. Colours like blaze orange reduce a hunter's chance of being mistaken for a deer and accidentally shot by another hunter.

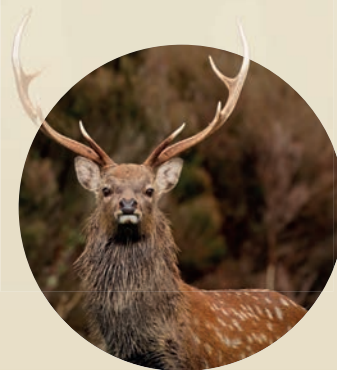
Smelly

A deer digests its food very thoroughly, which makes its droppings smooth and shiny. Hunters keep an eye out for these droppings – they provide excellent clues. A male's droppings are more joined-up than a female's; fresh droppings mean the deer is close by. "Fresh poop is gooey in the middle and feels warm," says Madison. "Fresh footprints feel warm, too." Old droppings are hard, shrunken, and light in colour.

Deer are smelly, and dogs are very good at sniffing them out. The Cleavers always go into the bush with their youngest Vizsla dog, Izzy. She adores hunting, always "locking up" when a deer is around. She becomes stiff, has a straight tail, and "indicates strong" (this means pointing a front leg in the direction of the deer) when she senses a deer close by.

NEW ZEALAND'S COMMON DEER SPECIES

There are seven species of deer in New Zealand. The three most common are sika deer, red deer, and fallow deer. Red and fallow deer are found in the North and South islands. Sika deer are found in the North Island only.



SIKA DEER



RED DEER



FALLOW DEER

MALE **stag**

FEMALE **hind**

YOUNG **fawn or calf**

MALE **stag**

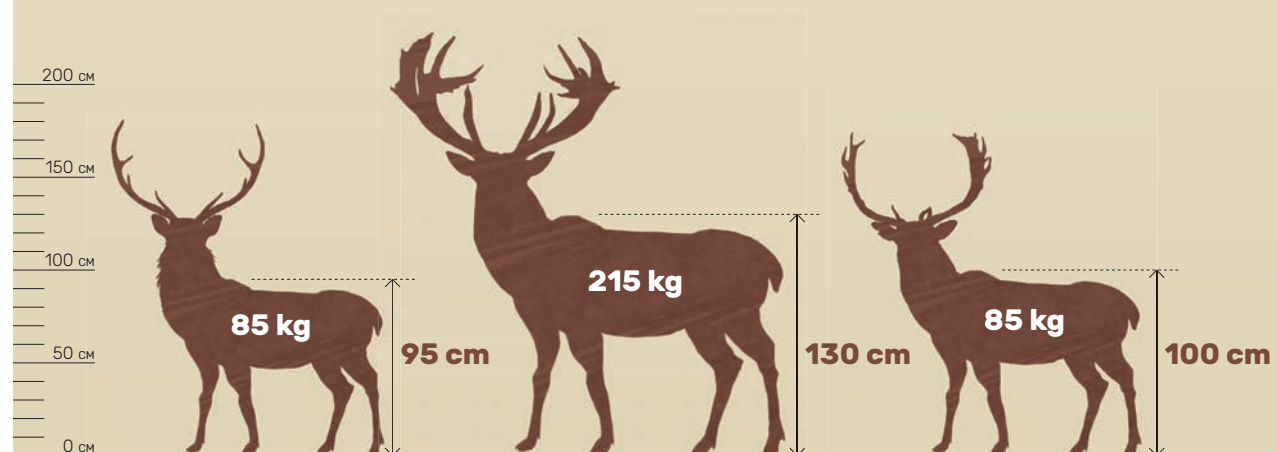
FEMALE **hind**

YOUNG **fawn or calf**

MALE **buck**

FEMALE **doe**

YOUNG **fawn**





Dawn and dusk

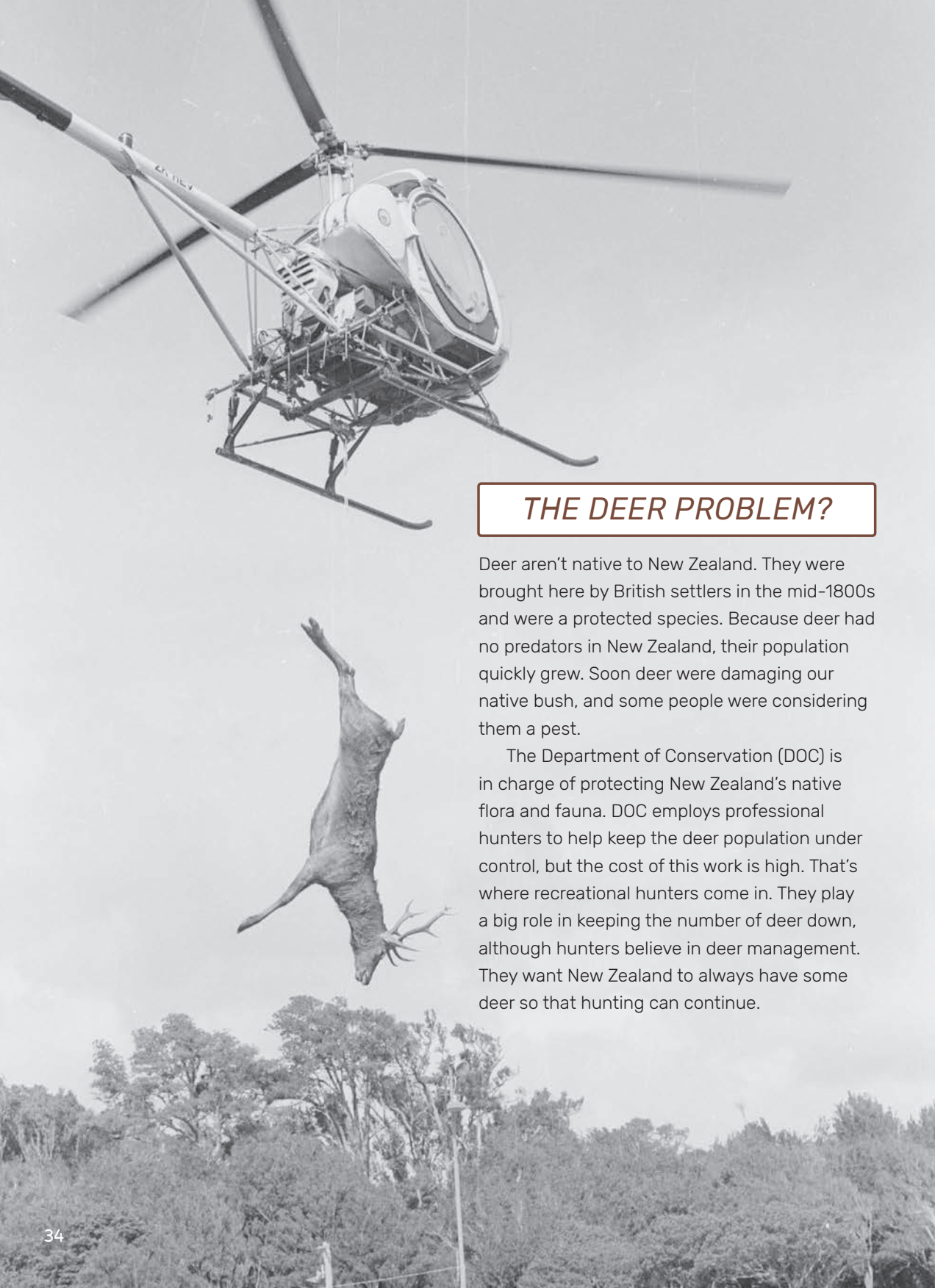
Deer are most active around dawn and dusk. They also graze in the open during spring. These are all good times to hunt. Autumn is best of all – it's the mating season, also called the rut or roar. Antlered males, with raging hormones and no time to eat, become cranky and less cautious. They're too busy staking out territory, which involves peeing in kicked-up dirt and loud roaring. Hunters imitate these roars in the hope a deer will respond and betray its location. "Some deer even come to you," says Matt. The family all agree that Jack is the bomb at roaring. He practises constantly before each trip.

Taking the shot

All hunters are aware of keeping themselves and others safe. "The person with the gun always goes in front," says Madison, "so the gun's pointing in a safe direction." Jack isn't big enough to shoot while he's standing. He needs to lie down in a place that has a view of the grazing area. With the gun supported on his pack, he's ready to take a shot.

Matt says the first rule is to always clearly identify that the target is a deer. Hunters never shoot a female with a fawn. If the hunter's confident that they'll get a clean shot into a vital organ, they pull the trigger. Afterwards, even if they think they've missed, the area is checked – just to be sure. But if the shot's successful, there's a family photo, then the deer is butchered. Izzy is rewarded with the fresh tongue, and fried heart is back on the menu!





THE DEER PROBLEM?

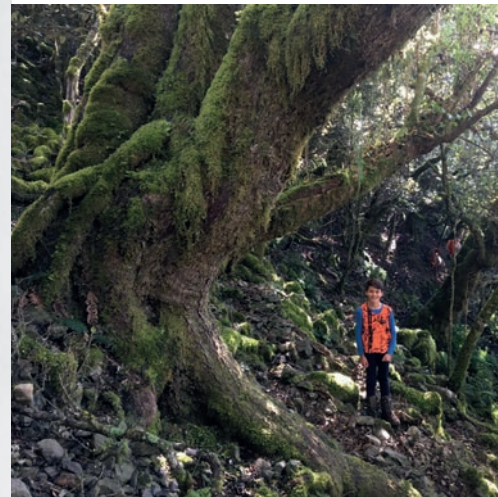
Deer aren't native to New Zealand. They were brought here by British settlers in the mid-1800s and were a protected species. Because deer had no predators in New Zealand, their population quickly grew. Soon deer were damaging our native bush, and some people were considering them a pest.

The Department of Conservation (DOC) is in charge of protecting New Zealand's native flora and fauna. DOC employs professional hunters to help keep the deer population under control, but the cost of this work is high. That's where recreational hunters come in. They play a big role in keeping the number of deer down, although hunters believe in deer management. They want New Zealand to always have some deer so that hunting can continue.

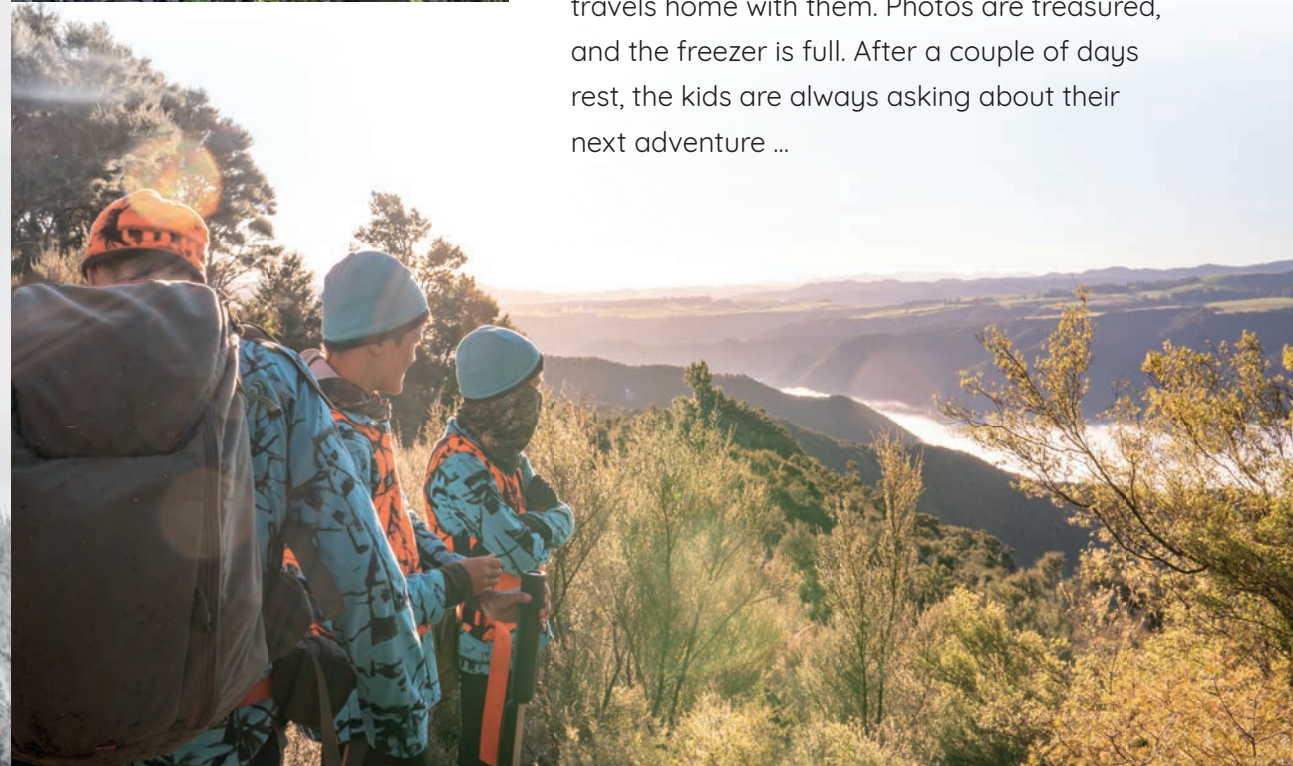
Downsides



The Cleaver kids say there are a few drawbacks to hunting. The first couple of days can be tiring while they rebuild fitness. "Climbing hills can be the hardest thing ever," Madison says. "Dad always tells us the only way up is putting one foot in front of the other." Crossing streams means wet boots, and Jack hates pulling them on the next morning. Madison misses having a toilet, especially at night.



The kids reel off things to avoid, like stinging nettle and rats. One time, Matt woke a hut filled with trampers when a cat-sized rat climbed on his face. But unpleasant experiences often make the funniest stories, and the family loves sharing them. They also love that the fitness, grit, and resourcefulness they develop in the hills travels home with them. Photos are treasured, and the freezer is full. After a couple of days rest, the kids are always asking about their next adventure ...



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by Kathryn Mercer

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