

# HUNT LIKE A WARRIOR

Unzipping the tent the fresh cool autumn breeze that greets my face is welcome. As I look upwards through the canopy of the conifer trees into the night sky I can see the low hanging harvest moon large and glazing in the star lit sky. The moon is providing enough illumination to see about 70 meters on the forest floor. The temperature is about 3 degrees and there is a slight south westerly breeze. This hunt would take us into the dark mysterious forest where the wild swift ones live Sika deer. Andrew has already awoken and is warming himself at the camp fire, as the smell of strong coffee fills the air.

As we leave camp the fog has enveloped this mature conifer forest making visibility in the twilight through the dark brown bark of the spruce trees to a distance of around 50 meters. Moving at a slow stride through the white sheets of fog we are stalking this forest at a pace to match the current atmospheric conditions. About an hour into this hunt the temperatures starts to rise on this October morning, the wind picks up and is blowing the fog giving for brief intervals of clarity to about 100 meters. The wind can be heard at distance coming down the mountain arriving to where we are, the sound of the wind blowing the high tops the conifer trees is ghostly.

It is unmistakable the sound of the sika stags whistle. The volume of the call echoing through the forest is primeval. Sika Stags give a high pitched whistle during the rut, use of this 'whistle' may be used to attract hinds, mark out territories and warn off potential rivals. The "Rut" is a word used to describe the breeding season for deer not just its peak, it refers to all behaviours and activities associated with the mating season.

October is the time of year for some is what copulates hunting. Crisp days hunting the male of the species, with memories of stags – bucks defending their hard earned hinds – Doe's. Stags have by now entered the arena, rounded up the females and defend their territories - rutting stands ruthlessly.

The sika stags whistles came from only a few hundred meters away. Checking the direction of the wind the white powder of the windicator which is almost invisible on this foggy morning. We decide on a route to take through the forest to get into a distance where I can get a clear look at this rutting stag. The stag that came into view 150 meters on the clear fell was a young 3-4 year old stag that has potential to be a really good stag in a few years so obviously was left to get on with wrecking the heather he had a quarrel with.

So how did we get here? Well it started last April, in the early spring with the cold damp mornings in the lush green agriculture fields

adjacent to the forest maintaining a distance from the hinds observing all areas of ground they hinds are hefted too. The stags – bucks come to the hinds - does so if you manage the hinds and spend time getting to know their routes, including feeding and bedding areas you will have a better grasp on what to expect when the deer rut late September – early October.

## **SCOUTING FOR DEER IN THE OFF SEASON.**



In Ireland the deer hunting season is six months long. The hunting season starts on 1st September until the 28th of February with male deer in season from 1st of September until December 31st female and antlerless deer can be hunted from November 1st until 28th of February.

This means we have six months of the year to hunt deer and the remaining six months which can be coupled with other forms of shooting, upskilling and maintenance to your ground along with predator control of foxes so my scouting trips are usually coupled with vermin control as foxes take fawns/calves. So with the hunting season ending on the 28th of February, there is ample opportunity to control foxes before the fawns are born in early summer.

*I believe every deer hunter should be involved in predator control, not just to reap the rewards of venison, but we need to assist deer herds all year long.*



## **EQUIPMENT FOR SCOUTING.**

When scouting for deer you apply the same methods for actual hunting of deer, the same principals apply. I have modified my existing hunting equipment to act as scouting equipment. This saves in the weight department in what you need to carry. My Swarovski el binoculars attached to a cleverly designed Kestrel glassing system monopod with a phone skope that holds my phone and is then attached to my binoculars allows me to photograph and video deer. This scouting equipment is super lightweight, practical and affordable. Using this equipment gives me the ability to observe deer at a distance and to not needlessly disturb them. By studying deer throughout the year you will familiarize yourself with herd numbers, structure and movement throughout your hunting ground. You will know where does/hinds go to give birth and where your stags/ bucks spend their summers. As both sexes only really are seen in large numbers together during the rutting period. By traversing and studying your ground you will be in a better position when the hunting season opens to selectively manage deer in an ethical professional manner.

## **EQUIPMENT FOR HUNTING DURING THE SIKARUT**

*Hunting in October the weather can be more predictable it's usually stable but it is Ireland so my equipment list for such hunts is as follows*

- *A first AID kit – is always with me either in my waist bag or backpack.*
- *Glass: Swarovski EL range 10x42 binoculars, in a marsupial binocular harness.*
- *Rifle: Blaser R8 held in an Akila chassis. Calibre 6.5x55mm fed on a diet of Norma 120grain.*
- *Ballistics tips.*
- *Scope Zeiss V8 2.8-20x56 – with custom ballistic turret.*
- *Moderator - Fryer and Devik 196 moderator - FHF moderator cover.*
- *Spartan precision javelin bipod & Spartan precision quad sticks.*
- *Knife: A Tyto replaceable blade knife – and Argali Knife.*
- *Excluding the 5 rounds in the rifle I also always carry 10 rounds of ammunition in a bullet pouch tethered to my binocular harness.*
- *Other accruements: disposable gloves, saw, drag rope A Petzl Nao plus head torch that are held in waist bag, –Nalgene bottle 1 litre water bottle.*
- *Wind indicator –*
- *Kestrel glassing system.*
- *Phoneskope.*
- *Insect repellent – for tick prevention.*

## **CLOTHING**

When deerstalking in mid-October I found a layering system to be the most effective. With elevations gains on a hunt north of 400 meters the ascent can be hard and with the decent being some hours later with varied changes in temperatures, It's worth investing in reliable clothing that's keeps one warm, dry and is designed with functionally for mountain hunting. I use The Stone glacier de Havilland pants with its option to install of knee pads which are perfect for a mountain hunters when closing the distance on animals when crawling in



mountainous terrain, the knee pads also give comfort when field dressing animals and the side zips allow for ventilation on a pack out. Another piece of clothing I wouldn't go on the hill without is the SG the Helio hoodie, using the hood in the early season for protection against the sun and as part of a layering system in winter it gives protection from the biting winds along with concealment. The Stone Glacier solid colour system is perfect for mountain hunters who stalk in areas of high amenity.

For the wet days I use a Swazi Tahr jacket when it's not raining a Fleece, jacket with synthetic base layers. KUIU gloves, gaiters, belt, and Scarpa boots

Harkila military cap with bream for when the sun is shining and first lite beanie in the morning and evening when it's cooler.

## **RIFLE**

Weight or lack of it, is the order of the day when deer stalking as every gram counts, a short accurate packable rifle with bipods is required. The uncomplicated Akila chassis system permits one to install there existing blaser barrel, bolt and trigger system to have a fully functioning gun. It's adjustable stock gives for a compact rig when packing animals out



allowing one to safely stow an unloaded gun in a backpack and to concentrate on navigating down the mountain without having to worry about my rifle.

A bipod is very advantageous when deer stalking for a number of reasons, when one is hill stalking often a low crawl requires to get into shooting position, it can also be a waiting game and one benefits from having your rifle rested on a bipod in a near ready shooting position. I have found shooting off Spartan precision bipods the clear advantages of carbon are: weight, strength and recoil management. Also carbon does not break down, corrode or need maintenance like many other materials.

### ***THE HUNT***

At this point I'm three days into this hunt and having shot cull stags on the previous I was now determined to make the most of the opportunities and try and take an old mature stag. If this works out great if not well I'm out in the forest enjoying nature at an incredible time of year. I had decided I was going to hunt all day from dawn to dusk to try and make the most of this good weather as it could not be more perfect on this early October morning, there are relatively clear blue sky and a slight south west breeze just enough to camouflage any unwanted sounds.

In the faint predawn light I can make out the silhouette of a hind, calf and follower two hundred meters grazing on a forest ridge as I'm loading bullets into my magazine while I hear the faint whistle / roar from about 1 kilometre away.

The hunting conditions this morning were the best they have been being for the last 3 days. The previous days the weather conditions we experienced torrential rain, strong winds and high temperatures the exact opposite to what you want in the October when the rut is underway. The rain itself is not a problem but with the high winds you cannot hear the location of the male deer calling so you rely on your experience from your scouting trips.

Standing on the base of a sodden drainage bank meters away from relatively new clear felled ground I'm waist high in rushes and with the high embankment behind me I am well camouflaged with



my outline broken up by the standing natural features. It was the sudden movement of a set of ears perched on the head of a deer that lead me to glass to my right at 150 distance meters away I can see a hind and calf grazing amongst the tree stumps both animals are completely unaware of my



presence. At this point I being stalking all day I started stalking at a half hour before first light at this point it is now down to the last hour of day light. I have purposely positioned myself in the key observation position for the remainder of the day's hunt, with the wind in my face and the setting sun behind me lighting up the timber spoil heaps on the clear fell with a golden hue.

With approx. one hour of daylight left from this position I can see the forest in the foreground there is open section of clear fell which is about 450 meters long by 700 meters wide. Using the grid method I start to reconnoitre the clear-fell. When glassing break your chosen view into sections, foreground, middle and background then grid to left middle and right sections. Using this three grid method allows you to concentrate on one section, when one area is completely reconnoitred you can move onto the next section of ground. It's also a method that can be used when stalking with someone as you can give a clear indication of where the deer are precisely located. Bear in mind a clear fell may at first glance appear void of deer it takes time to spot the naturally concealed deer.

Keeping the hind and calf in eyeshot, it's always nice to see animals grazing at last light but I'm concerned there is no stag with them as this is the peak of the rut, there should be a stag within proximity to the hinds. Maybe the hinds are already covered and the last three days of inclement weather was the peak of the rut.

Shrugging off any doubts from my elevated position while again checking the wind direction I look left and at a distance of approx. 350 meters in a small hollow in the clear-fell I then pick out one, two and then 4 hinds along with four calves and two spikers,





about ten minutes later as the last warming rays of the evening sunlight hit the clear fell. I see the stag standing at the edge of the forest with his head held high smelling the breeze as he slowly walks out of the forest and when 50 meters or so onto the stage he starts to canter circling the hinds and charging at one of the spikers....all I can think to myself is what an entrance!. With his head held high I am looking at the stag through the binoculars He's roaring but I cannot hear him even though his only 350meters away he's either run out of gone hoarse. He's a beautiful mature stag almost entirely black coated with the tips of the mane silver, he's massive body dwarfs the hinds he's peat stained antlers are long thick and have moss hanging off one side of his brow tines. I watch this stag for almost 15 minutes to gauge whether his old enough to take he's almost constantly moving so this is quite difficult, he sloped pedicles and the majority of the weight of the stag was to the front quarter of the body tells him he's an old stag. I range the hinds as they are moving in my direction and know the stag will follow. Carefully I take the rifle of my shoulder and chamber a round and placing the rifle on the quadsticks I move them in to a position that gives maximum stability, I have the quadsticks set to the widest possible forward angle with the fore end of the rifle on the front cradle and the back cradle near the end of the rifles recoil pad, this maximum span gives for the steadiest shooting position.

Ranging the deer herd again I set the ASV on my Zeiss V8 scope and then set the parallax until I have a crystal clear view. I then wait for the stag who is still circling the hinds and when he's in between two of the hinds the illuminated dot is on in the scope, I disengage the safety on my blaser rifle, The stag is standing broadside and perfectly square, a spiker then walks in front of him and ruins my opportunity.

Keeping my finger off the trigger I see a hind then leads the herd to the right and the stag put his head down and walks after the hind and the circles back up the hill and in doing so again unfolds my opportunity. Waiting and waiting eventually the stag full of energy has two hinds either side of him, the stag stands in a small moss covered area of the clear fell lifts his head up and starts to whistle.

He lets out one whistle and I know being a sika there should be two more to follow this give me the opportunity to engage my bullet pre-flight check, the stag is re - ranged, my crosshairs are level, inhaling I hold my position and while exhaling the crosshairs are moving with the ebb and flow of my breathing cycle up and down, This slight rocking motion is now held firm with the red dot of the rifle scope half way up the body of the stag and the crosshair just behind the front shoulder.

Placing the remaining amount of pressure on the trigger the shot is fired, while maintaining sight picture the bullet has hit the stag high on the shoulder before the recoil takes over I see the stags legs collapsed as he drops to the shot while the echo of the 6.5x55mm bullet impacts, the muffled report startles the remaining deer, who now gather there thoughts and move back into the forest.

I make a mental note of a lone birch tree 15 meters or so away from where the stag lays - when you move from your position onto the clear fell it is easy to loose exact location of a shot animal. Leaving an orange disposable glove at a height on the branch of the tree beside my shooting position I can use this easily distinguished feature to range back to where I stood when the shot was taken and using this method I should be in close proximity of the stag.

It takes time to traverse the clear fell and it's now near dark by the time I get to where the stag is. First I see the left side of the antler sticking up with the stags head lying flat on the moss covered ground, As I get closer I am taken back by the sheer size of the stags body. Its beautiful mature stag with a long, bulky body a beautiful mane with dark but worn tipped heavy antlers. Touching the eye ball of the stag with my quadsticks I do this for safety reason and with no reaction from the eye I can confirm the stag is expired. Battling the fading light this stag now becomes a food product I give time and care to gralloch the animals as I look to the sky in the twilight my thoughts turn to extracting the stag of this tricky to navigate clear fell.

Dragging the stag off the clear fell takes considerable time, I am very grateful for the opportunity to be able to hunt these beautiful animals who bear it out in this relentless environment all year long under sun and moon, I hunt these animals with the intention of improving the herd. This stag was mature and judging by the wear on his teeth if we do encounter a hard winter in the coming months this stag would have not weathered to well. Rewilding is the current buzz word with the ill-informed who want to remove recreational hunters who are responsible for the vast majority of deer managed in this country and be replaced in areas by wolves. Hunting in Ireland is a traditional than now can be now traced back thirty three thousand years. Back then it was a matter of life and death now it a way more important, my advice is for these animated people to head off the beaten track as there are plenty of wild places to be explored it's the human who needs to re-wild themselves not the mountains or forest. People should choose to be a participant in nature rather than a spectator.

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