

MDF

MULE DEER FOUNDATION

Magazine



For the Conservation of Mule Deer, Black Tail Deer, and their Habitat. May/June 06

SITKA DEER HAVEN, HUNTER'S HEAVEN

STORY BY KENT CUMMINS (ALASKA USDAFS)

A view of Clarence Strait from the Tongass National Forest. The Tongass has 10,000 miles of shoreline. (Photo by Ashley Atkinson)





PHOTO ASHLEY ATKINSON

In Alaska's rain forest, many people live to hunt while others hunt to live. Sometimes, these hunters are one and the same.

Sport and subsistence hunting are a way of life throughout the archipelago of southeast Alaska. The game many seek is the Sitka black-tailed deer and the place they seek them in is the Tongass National Forest.

The Tongass

At nearly 17 million acres, the Tongass is the largest national forest in the country, stretching some 500 miles north to south from Yakutat to Ketchikan. With its back nudging up to Canada and facing the Gulf of Alaska, this inimitable coastal temperate rainforest cuddles the famous Inside Passage.

This mammoth landscape of dense forest, glaciers, and mountains is twice the size of Maryland and comprises more than 90 percent of the lands of southeast Alaska. Some of the most pristine, untouched

wilderness can be found here and so can hundreds of thousands of native Sitka black-tailed deer.

These unique deer flourish throughout the immense and varied landscape of the Tongass, which includes nearly nine and a half million acres of old-growth forests. It is a utopia for Sitka blacktails and some would say darned-near paradise for those who hunt them.

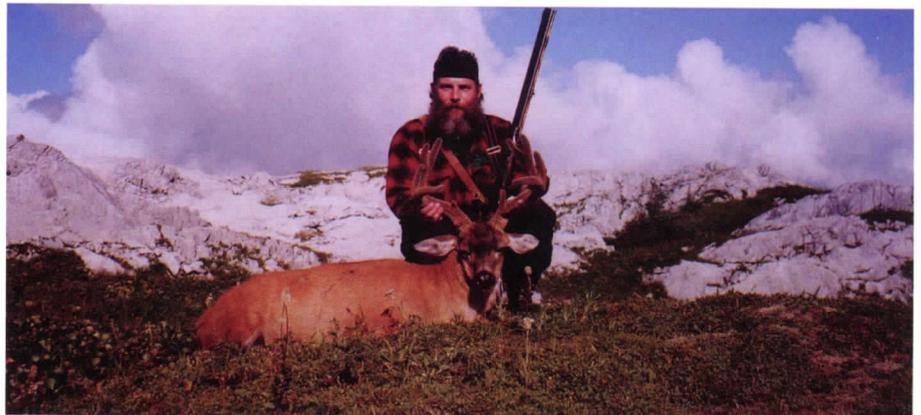
Sitka Blacktails

The Sitka black-tailed deer, a subspecies of the mule deer, is smaller, stockier, and has a shorter face than other members of the black-tail group. According to the Alaska

Department of Fish and Game, the average October live weight of adults is about 80 pounds for does and 120 pounds for bucks, although dressed-weight bucks of nearly 250 pounds have been reported.

One person who can attest to big bucks in the Tongass is Jim Baichtal, a Forest Service geologist and self-admitted Sitka blacktail fanatic. Baichtal owns the top two world record spots for Sitka black-tail taken with a muzzleloader in The Longhunter Record Book.

He took his world-record deer in early August 1998 in the high-country alpine of Dall Island off of the west coast of Prince of Wales Island



near Craig, Alaska. The number two buck came the next year in late October while hunting a glacial-scoured valley near Thorne Bay on Prince of Wales Island.

The first buck's antlers scored 121 6/8" by the Boone and Crockett scoring method and 125 3/8" Safari Club International points. The second buck's rack gross scored 112 7/8" with only 3 2/8" deductions for a final score of 109 5/8" under the Boone and Crockett scoring system. Baichtal's world-record buck is quite

an accomplishment considering, on average, Sitka deer antlers are relatively small, with very few scoring more than 108 points by the Boone and Crockett system.

The Pursuit

Big bucks are to be had in southeast Alaska. According to Baichtal, August through November is the best time to hunt a trophy deer, and for people coming from the Lower 48, Prince of Wales Island is their best bet. Located at the southern end of southeast Alaska, Prince of Wales, all 2,231 square miles of it, is the third largest island in the United States. It proved to be a good bet for a hunter from Pennsylvania. Andrew Klejka, who runs a family beef cattle farm in Mt. Pleasant, spent a week last November on the island hunting with Ketchikan-based guide, Johnnie Laird. Laird runs Muskeg Excursions and helps visitors experience the one-of-a-kind hunting adventure the area offers.

"We based out of Johnnie's cabin near Hollis on Prince of Wales Island and hunted the rut. It was a different experience hunting in a rain forest," Klejka quipped. "I mean it really rains here, and snows, and rains....it can test your equipment." Klejka took his first buck on the second day. "We used the road system to get around and we hit the muskegs," he said. "Johnnie used a call and I actually thought this one doe was going to attack us. It was really something,



PHOTO SANDY FROST

That doe came right up to us and I've never seen such aggravated behavior before. It was the first time I've ever seen a deer climb right up on a log and pace back and forth."

"No bucks were around this doe, but later we saw a nice buck with several does in an open area and I took him. It was a big buck, about 165-pound live weight. These Sitka blacktail are very broad, heavy-bodied animals."

Klejka took another buck on day four with a Freedom Arms .454 Casull pistol.

"The fourth day out, we traveled up an old logging road. It had snowed heavy and we got so far and hiked the rest of the way into a muskeg. Johnnie called him in and I took him with a .454 Casull scoped from about 75 yards. It was a smaller forked horn, about the size of a Pennsylvania whitetail, and the



meat was perfect. The venison is delicious. It is a totally different taste. It's much tastier than the whitetail here."

The cattle farmer from Pennsylvania said it's not an easy hunt in southeast Alaska but well worth the effort.

"The interesting thing about hunting here is that you can start at sea level with sun and rain then end up at 2,000 feet with freezing snow," he said. "It can also be very up-close hunting. The Sitka deer don't seem as spooky as whitetail."

Big bucks do inhabit the Tongass, but "first bucks" also roam these public lands. Jonathan Higgins, a 14-year-old Australian hunter, knows this first-hand. Jonathan and his father, Bruce, traveled to Ketchikan from Phoenix, where the elder Higgins was employed, for a short three-day August hunt with Laird. The hunting party float-

and small game in the past, but he had lots of hours in at the range in preparation for his Alaskan hunt."

The young Australian succeeded on the second day of his Tongass quest. He took his first Sitka black-tail in a lower muskeg alpine. "The plan was to let Jonathan take the first buck we could get on," Laird explained. "As we crested a small brushy ridge there, at about 200-plus yards was a deer, quartering away, looking back at us. Jonathan took the lead as I followed close and we used what cover we had to close the gap. At about 160 yards or so I asked Jonathan what he thought." After he replied that he felt comfortable with the shot distance, he took his time and fired his rifle. The buck bolted and disappeared into the brush.

"It was an anxious few minutes as we approached the spot," said Laird. "But, his shot was true and

will be a trophy he will never forget. I feel very fortunate to have a small part in what will become a highlight in Jonathan's hunting adventures. Feelings like that are few and far between."

These visiting hunters acquired a first-hand taste of the excitement and challenge of hunting the sometimes unpredictable Sitka black-tailed deer in this island country.

Baichtal understands the exhilaration well. He has lived the dream over and over again. He's hunted in southeast Alaska for 15 years, hunts more than 20 days per year and scouts continuously. But, his zeal for these rain forest dwellers goes beyond the hunt. When he's not pursuing them with his black-powder rifle, he's studying them every chance he gets.

"Sitka blacktail are my passion," said Baichtal. "Everything about them ... understanding ecology, hunting perspective, seasonality, the way they live, eat, and move on landscape. I love pursuing them and I love learning about them.

"I'm a lover of hunting deer. There are thousands of articles per year written about whitetail and mule deer and many books describe these species and hunting tactics for them. A few articles and books focus on Columbia blacktail. But, Sitka deer are seldom written about. Fewer articles yet focus on hunting Sitka in southeastern Alaska. We have a great animal here that not much is known about."

But, Baichtal keeps studying to learn more and share his knowledge. Although a geologist by trade, Baichtal is known locally as a Sitka deer "guru," and he has assist-



PHOTO JOHNNIE LAIRD

planed into a high mountain lake on Prince of Wales Island last summer to give Jonathan a shot at his first-ever big game animal.

"This was the first big game hunt in his young hunting career," said Laird. "He had hunted some birds

the deer, a small branch-antlered buck, was laying there in the brush." It hadn't traveled 15 yards. "Bruce was one proud father," exclaimed Laird. It was a great shot and a great moment. True trophies come in all shapes and sizes and Jonathan's two point Sitka blacktail



PHOTO CAROLYN VAN WEEL

ed the ADF&G with studies that look at bear and wolf predation and how it influences deer feeding and movement habits.

Baichtal has also uncovered interesting facts about Sitka deer history as part of his Forest Service geologist duties. While exploring some of the many caves found in southeast Alaska, the bones of many Sitka blacktail are discovered, some of these dating to nearly 8,200 years ago. One question that pops up from time to time for area biologists is, "How many blacktails rove the Tongass?"

According to the ADF&G, deer populations are dynamic and fluctuate considerably with the severity of the winters. When winters are mild, deer numbers generally increase. Periodically, however, a severe winter will cause a major decline in the population. However, deer have a high reproductive potential and depressed populations normally recover rapidly. In some cases, predation may speed deer decline, as well as slow recovery to higher levels. The wolf is considered the major predator of deer in southeast

Alaska. Both black and brown bears also prey on deer to some degree. Although estimates of more than 200,000 deer are tossed around "unofficially," Boyd Porter, a wildlife biologist with the ADF&G, said a more precise number is in the works. "We are in the process of accomplishing a first-ever, three-year study to mark and recapture Sitka deer to determine more accurate estimates," Porter said.

Many locals will tell you, in unscientific terms, that there are a "whole bunch" of blacktails wandering the Tongass and the proof is that it's not uncommon to see them strolling the neighborhoods in many of the 32 communities throughout the forest.

Habitat Improvement

Tongass National Forest land managers want to ensure black-tail deer continue to thrive and are focusing on restoration thinning activities to improve wildlife habitat and allow hunters to have success and a memorable experience. Deer are highly dependent on old-growth spruce and hemlock forests; espe-

cially for winter survival. Areas cleared of trees produce abundant forage during summer. However, during winter, these areas are often inaccessible due to deep snow. As cleared areas age, conifer growth becomes dense, shading out understory forage plants leaving poor habitat for deer.

Managers of the Tongass understand this and are doing something about it. "The Tongass Forest Plan employs one of the best old-growth conservation strategies in the world to assure key old-growth habitats are maintained, and most importantly, that the temperate old-growth forest is ecologically sustainable," said Tongass National Forest Supervisor Forrest Cole. "Old growth is, and will continue to be, the predominant vegetative structure on the Tongass."

This is good news not only for Sitka deer but all fish and wildlife in the Tongass. Clear, clean streams and lakes provide habitat for reproduction of salmon and trout. The Tongass is also home to bald eagles, northern harriers, sharp-shinned hawks, merlins, red-tailed hawks,

northern goshawks, and short-eared owls. It is teeming with brown bears, black bears, wolves, mountain goats, elk, moose, beaver, mink, marten, wolverine, and river otters.

"Today, we know that what we leave on the land is more important than what we take away," said Scott Snelson, a wildlife, fisheries, ecology, and watershed staff officer for the Tongass. "Our aim is to make decisions about resource extraction based on the health of the land."

Although very little timber harvesting occurs now on the Tongass, heavier logging from 40 to 60 years ago presents an opportunity for thinning these "young-growth" areas for deer and other wildlife.

"We are focusing more on habitat restoration to ensure a robust protection throughout the forest, even in areas we actively manage," said Snelson. "This restoration not only benefits wildlife, but also the 74,000 people who live in southeast Alaska. I like to refer to it as a 'restoration economy.' That is what we are trying to grow here and it will definitely benefit Sitka deer and hunters, both sport and subsistence." Snelson went on to say that thinning and other vegetation treatments show excellent promise for improving habitat for deer and other old-growth-dependent species in previously harvested stands. "Thinning basically accomplishes two things for deer," said Susan Howell, a Tongass wildlife biologist in Thorne Bay. "It improves forage and accelerates tree growth. The young-growth trees that have naturally generated in these areas that were harvested over time begin blocking out the sunlight necessary to give life to the forest floor," Howell explained. "Thinning these

trees allows the understory to develop and provide the necessary forage for deer. The tree growth is important because the canopy cover acts as huge snow umbrellas in the winter allowing the deer to traverse the area to feed."

The Forest Service has several thinning projects in the works on Prince of Wales Island where there are 124,000 acres of young-growth trees in high value deer habitat. Eighty-one thousand acres of this highly valued deer habitat has been identified as key deer harvest areas for both subsistence users and sport hunting.



PHOTO SANDY FROST

According to a Forest Service habitat capability model these stands, as they are, can sustain as few as two deer per square mile. However, habitat capability for stands that are thinned or treated to accelerate a return to a state more characteristic of an old-growth condition, may be capable of producing as many as forty deer per square mile.

How you can help

Tongass land managers continuously seek partners who share mutual conservation interests, such as the Mule Deer Foundation, to help with these types of restoration projects.

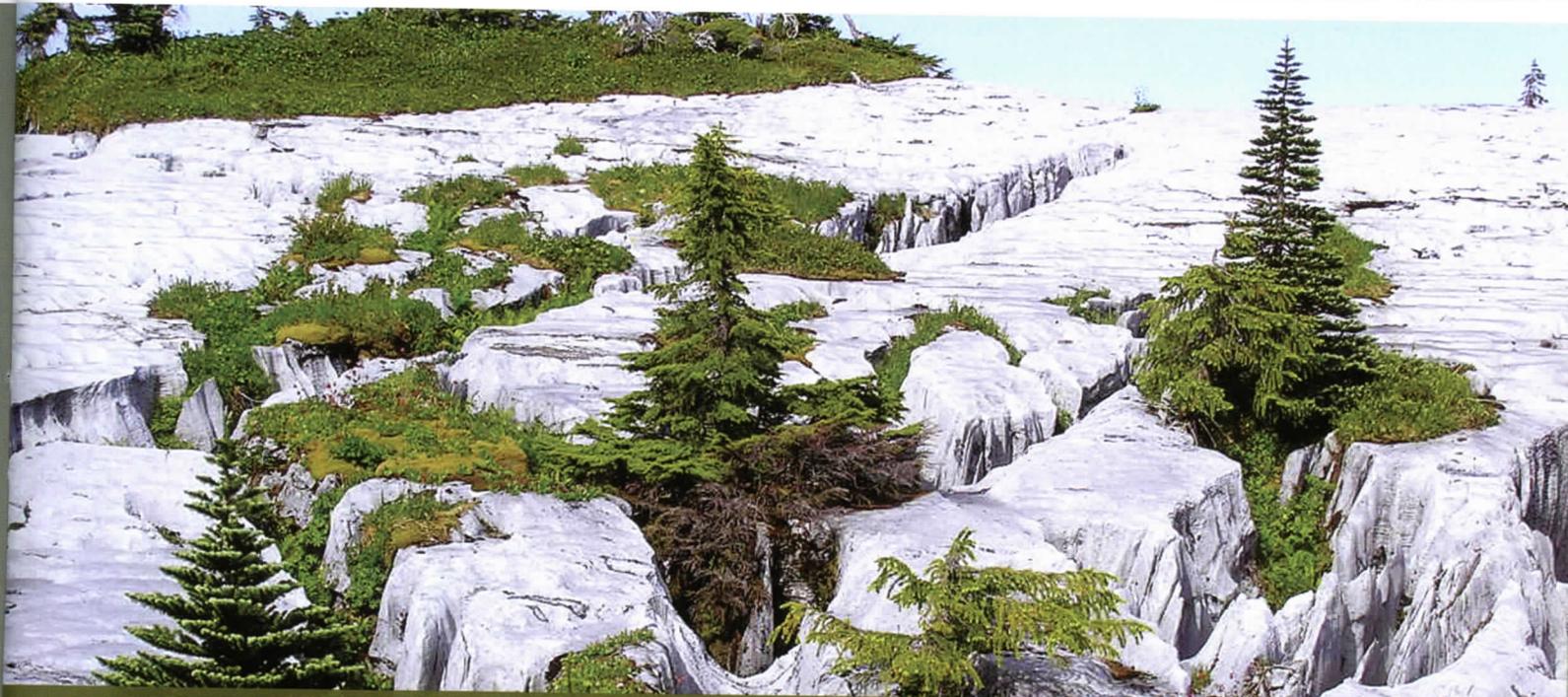
The most recent example of this kind of collaboration is the partnerships formed with The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited to work together on watershed restoration and enhancement projects. TNC and TU are currently working with the Forest Service to restore salmon and steelhead habitat in Sal Creek on Prince of Wales Island. Restoration activities such as these provide both habitat and economic benefits to communities.

Restoring and improving deer habitat is a priority for Tongass land managers and this is great news for all hunters, both local and visitors. Whether someone is hunting for sport, to fill the freezer, or both, trekking in one of the most unique ecosystems on earth will have a person hoping it's more than a once in a lifetime experience. If a person is fortunate enough to experience southeast Alaska they will yearn for more of it.

MDF members interested in forming a chapter in southeast Alaska, or working with Tongass managers to improve and protect Sitka black-tailed deer habitat, can contact Dennis Neill, Tongass Partnerships and Public Affairs staff officer and MDF member, at (907) 228-6201, or dneill@fs.fed.us.

For more information about hunting in Alaska check out the Alaska Department of Fish and Game website at www.wildlife.alaska.gov. For more information about the public lands of the Tongass go to www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass. For more information about Johnnie Laird's Muskeg Excursions check out his website at www.muskegexcursions.com.





Above; The unique alpine karst landscape on Dall Island in the Tongass National Forest. The Tongass contains one of the richest karst topographies on earth. (Photo by Jim Baichtal)



Below; Jim Baichtal with a Sitka black-tailed buck he took on Prince of Wales Island. Sitka blacktails are heavy-bodied deer. (Photo by Jim Baichtal)