Updated 1/26/2023

Thank you for your interest in Sitka black-tailed Deer and the Tongass National Forest. I am not a guide but I will help anyone who wants to come here be successful in their pursuit of Sitka black-tail deer, fishing, kayaking, exploring, etc. This article is written from the perspective of pursuing blacktail in Southeast Alaska and may not offer as much insight to those who wish to chase blacktail in Kodiak or Prince William Sound.

For nearly 40 years I was a geologist for the US Forest Service working in the western US and Alaska. Thirty-two years of that service on the Tongass National Forest. I have now retired and have taken a position with the Mule Deer Foundation (MDF) as the Alaska Regional Coordinator. The mission of the Mule Deer Foundation is to ensure the conservation of mule deer, black-tailed deer and their habitat. I am all about that. Due to the aging of the young growth on Prince of Wales Island we have loss hundreds of thousands of acres of deer habitat., this is not a judgment statement just a fact. The forest canopy in these stands can become so dense that not enough light reaches the forest floor to grow browse for the deer. I hope by the efforts of the MDF working with the USFS we can treat large areas of young growth, improving the habitat, creating jobs, and putting deer back on those lands.

So, let's get started…

First if you are not camping or lodging with friends, we need to get you a place to stay. You can find out information on places to stay here on Prince of Wales Island at the following:

https://www.princeofwalescoc.org/directory
https://www.fs.usda.gov/tongass/
https://www.fs.usda.gov/activity/tongass/recreation/camping-cabins/?recid=78613&actid=101

As for when to hunt Sitka black-tail deer, it depends if you're a rural resident, a resident, or a non-resident. Rural residents can begin hunting Sitka black-tailed deer on June 24th on Federal lands. When and where Alaskan residents and non-residents can begin hunting varies by subsistence and state regulations and land ownership. Please carefully check both state and subsistence hunting regulations and be aware of federal and private land boundaries.

In Unit 2 if you are a non-resident hunter there are areas you can hunt beginning August 1st. If you want to hunt on Prince of Wales Island proper, your season would begin on federal lands, August 15th. I believe you could be most productive the last week of August and the first couple of weeks of September in the alpine regions or during the last week of October and the first three weeks of November during the chasing phase and the rut. You'll need to go a bit farther and climb a bit higher just like everywhere else to have a better chance at taking a better class of Sitka black-tailed deer. That is unless you just get lucky. If your 100 yards off of the road system you'll likely be by yourself. As most places, most of the hunters drive the roads. Those that are consistently more successful on better bucks put in this time and get off the roads.

You might consider ordering a Forest or District map depending on where you plan to hunt. They are now sold by the USGS in the USGS Store. Go to the USGS Store, Maps, U.S> Forest Service Visitor Maps. In the Keyword search box type Tongass or Chugach.
https://store.usgs.gov/filter-products?keyword=Tongass&country=US&region=AK&page=1

If hunting Prince of Wales you should consider downloading the Prince of Wales Island Visitor Guide.
https://www.princeofwalescoc.org/_files/ugd/a8e417_bf8c8d6460434ab198e158acf94f35e8.pdf

If you need USFS District information you can call the Thorne Bay (907-828-3304) or Craig Ranger District (907-826-3271) offices. Motor Vehicle Use Maps for Prince of Wales and other Districts are available at:
https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/tongass/maps-pubs/?cid=stelprdb5430063

If you're planning your hunt, you could use Google Earth, Gaia, Avenza, OnX, or goHunt… but you know this. That way you can research your access options and where roads go high getting you closer to the alpine if that is your chosen hunt. You can also assess your options in habitat, bedding areas, travel corridors, and calling spots. I have been using onXmaps. You can save tiles of imagery to use in the field as aerial photos when hunting. (Visit www.onxmaps.com). If you choose goHunt, use promo code "**RANDY"** at their website https://join.gohunt.com/try/insider/ if you buy app products and use that promo code, you're going to save some bucks.

A note of caution, weather and tides dictate all here. Weather does not dictate the deer's movement as much as our ability to hunt them. On years with higher-than-normal rain fall the alpine deer may be shrouded in clouds and fog nearly the whole season. We cannot control the weather during the time we have to hunt so you have to come prepared for 32-40 deg. weather with pouring rain, snow and wind. Everything else you get for weather is a blessing. Also, if you plan on hunting from a boat you need to contend with the possibility of stormy seas and our possible 26' tidal fluctuations. This is important when considering anchoring your boat so it will be there and floating upon you return. You don't want to learn that one the hard way!

Below are my personal opinions and observations on the seasonal movements and habits of Sitka black-tailed deer and how I would approach hunting them here. My observations are specific to Prince of Wales and the surrounding Islands and my personal experiences. I am passionate about these deer, I love the fact that little is known about their habits, and less is written. I personally believe that the world record Sitka black-tail lives on Prince of Wales or surrounding Islands, or at least did. The majority of articles written on the Sitka black-tail are from Kodiak Island. Hunting Southeast is not like hunting Kodiak. Our vegetation and terrain make it difficult to find the deer. It's a dense area, so be prepared, it may be close action hunting. That 40x scope on your 6.5

Creedmoor that can cloverleaf a dime at 2 miles, might not be the tool for this hunt. I do believe that our genetics are better here however and that we have higher quality habitat. There is a line somewhere across the Tongass where the depth of snow controls the population. North of that line, predation is limited and the depth of the snow pack controls the annual population fluctuations. This can be seen in the effects of the 2006/2007/2008 and 2011-2012 winters on Admiralty, Chichagof, and northern Baranof Islands populations. South of that line the population is locally affected by snow conditions but predation has a larger impact. Below are my ramblings of what I think their yearly cycles are like.

I suggest you contact Ross Dorendorf and/or Tessa Hasbrouck at ADF&G in Ketchikan at 907-225-2475 for additional views. My views on the Sitka black-tail deer here on the island come from my passion for these deer, my hunting of the deer, and that I volunteered with ADF&G for over 20 years, put over 100 radio collars on deer, and monitored hundreds of deer using telemetry during many winters. I was sought out for these projects because of my knowledge of the land, the deer and my ability to call them in close and dart them and help with processing and placement of the collars. I also assisted with radio tracking of collared individuals. We have also supported Dr. Todd Brinkman, UAF Wildlife Researcher and Instructors PHD dissertation estimating abundance of Sitka black-tailed deer using DNA from fecal pellets. I also assisted as much as possible with Dr. Sophie Gilbert's PhD work on reproduction and recruitment in Sitka black-tailed deer (*Odocoileus hemionus sitkensis*) on Prince of Wales Island in Southeast Alaska.

Publications generated by Dr. Todd brinkman, Dr. Sophie Gilbert and others are available at https://sitkablacktail.org/publications-and-info-1

You might also find the following useful or interesting:

The following information is not meant to be a substitute for Alaska Department of Fish and Game and Federal subsistence regulations. It is your responsibility to read and understand hunting seasons and regulations. Federal lands on Prince of Wales (Game Management Unit 2) are closed to non-federally qualified hunters during the August 1-15 period. Only the Outer Islands and the southeastern portion of Prince of Wales Island defined as "lands south of the West Arm of Cholmondeley Sound draining into Cholmondeley Sound or draining eastward into Clarence Strait" are open August 1 to non-federally qualified hunters. So, if you are not hunting on the southeastern portion of Prince of Wales Island or the Outer Islands as described above your season opens August 15th. Private and state lands on POW are open August 1st as well. Of course, private lands require permission to hunt and state lands aren't a large portion of what's left. Try and find this information in the hunting regulations…

https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/regulations/wildliferegulations/pdfs/regulations_complete.pdf
https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/2020-2022-wildlife-regs-book-web-reduced-size.pdf
https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/tongass/news-events/?cid=FSEPRD528114

If black bears are a part of your Southeast Alaska dream hunt as well, then as a non-resident you will need a draw permit. The Alaska draw hunt application period is November 1 to December 15, so don't wait until the last minute. If you miss the draw period you can contact the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and ask if there are 'Under Subscribed' black bear tags for Unit 2. It's a long shot, but it doesn't hurt to ask.
https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=huntlicense.drawsupplements

The following are my seasonal observations.

Post Rut/Winter movements: From mid-December through spring breakup, March or April depending on the snow load that year, the deer conserve energy by not moving much. I believe they occupy habitat with good thermal cover and that have a lot of browse close at hand. If the snow crusts over they may move short distances to feed. Riparian areas and wet areas may have short periods of green up of forbs that they will focus on. During the winter 1998-1999 we had a late snow that trapped deer in small pockets of habitat at higher elevations. Several of our radio collared deer starved to death because the snow limited vertical movement, generally claiming the younger deer. Mature bucks whose reserves are lowest after rut are vulnerable during this period. As discussed, Prince of Wales Island deer movement is not as controlled by snow load as northern Tongass deer herds. On most years they are dispersed from the low elevations to higher forested slopes on south-facing slopes up to 2000 feet elevation. This is controlled by the in-forest snow pack. With heavier snow loads at higher elevations the deer only move down slope as far as they need to still have limited movements and have access to food sources. The deer will not respond much to calling (fawn bleat) during this time. They may stand to see what the noise is but show little interest or remain in their beds. Snows approaching 18" depth or about the brisket height of deer control their movements. You'd probably think seriously before intentionally dragging your bare belly through the snow too. But seriously, once a deer has to plow snow to get around, they're burning energy they can't afford to lose.

Spring Break up through Late May Fawning Time: Deer movement increases as snow recedes and food becomes available. Suddenly you see deer everywhere. With the warming of the ground, skunk cabbage sprouts along with the first green growth and the flower stems which is a favorite food. I do not know what percentage of the deer population are lower landscape vs. upper slope deer, but the deer that move up to occupy the alpine areas begin to follow the receding snow upwards. Bucks may feed in bachelor groups. This is the time when they begin to replace fat reserves that were depleted during the winter. Their coat changes from the thick gray-brown winter coat to the thinner red coat of the spring and summer. The deer will sometimes respond to calling (fawn bleat) during this time.

Late May Fawning Time through early June Fawning: Suddenly new fawns are seen with the does everywhere. I have a theory that the does move slightly from their core areas to have the fawns and move them from the birthing site back to the core areas via the roads which are easier for the fawns to move along. This does not put the leavings of the birth in their core area lessening the probability of predation. Black bear will opportunistically take fawns at this time. Black bears are known to readily respond to the fawn bleat calls as will the does. I have

volunteered for ADF&G placing radio collars on does and fawns on POW. The fawn collaring study put collars on a total of 27 fawns of which 26 retained the collars for the first 2 weeks of their lives, 16 of those 26 were taken by black bears in the first 2 weeks of their lives. Between 2009 and 2012, Dr. Sophie Gilbert and I collared 150 fawns, ~40 % were eaten by black bear. I believe that the deer populations that move up the slopes with the receding snow may contribute more to populations since the bears move down in the spring and focus on the lower elevation deer fawns. This has not been substantiated through sampling but it is a possibility. We found out that does bed twins apart during the first two weeks of their lives and feed between them. This insures if a black bear preys on one fawn, both are not lost. Does will readily respond to calling (fawn bleat) during this time, defending the fawn they believe is in trouble, sometimes a buck will respond as well.

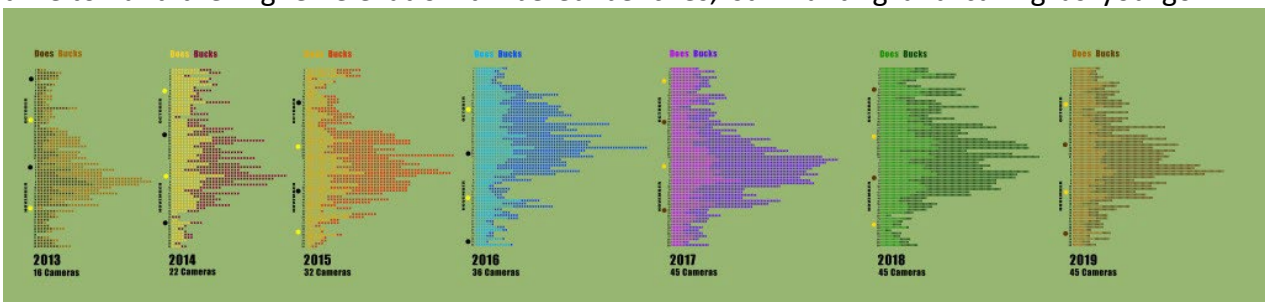
June through Mid-September: This is the time of plenty, when food is readily available. Fat reserves build up. If the snow leaves the alpine meadows early the forbs sprout and the deer move onto those slopes. I believe that if the slopes clear off early and the deer have access that the antlers will grow longer and develop faster. I have observed deer populations in the limestone alpine areas adjacent to non-limestone areas, where the deer only feed on the vegetation associated with the limestone. I believe this is because of the diversity of available plants and the plants larger growth. One study on immediately adjacent limestone and non-carbonate bedrock showed 74 and 22 plant species respectively. These areas are the lushest alpine areas we have. I believe that the lush vegetation growth on the limestone provides the deer with additional nutrients for bone, muscle, and antler development. Of course, I was the Forest Geologist and am biased. Fawns continue to be born in July and August based on the time the doe was bred. In mid-august the bucks shed their velvet and begin to rub on the short evergreens. The bucks remain in bachelor groups, though they begin to spar determining dominance. Many of these sparing sessions are only pushing matches but a hierarchy develops. I am sure this happens at the same time in the lower elevations but it is harder to witness because of the vegetation. I and others have trail camera photos to confirm this. Generally, the largest bucks are found at the highest elevations though this is not a given, they will also occupy the best habitat. Hunting the bucks in the alpine at this time is at the whims of the weather. If it is warm, they leave the alpine to bed in the timber as the sun rises across the landscape, not returning until near the setting sun and the lengthening shadows. If it is overcast and or rainy and foggy, they will remain out all day long though the fog may limit the ability to hunt these areas. some deer remain on the highest slopes until the deer cabbage and other alpine forbs begin to freeze out. They then move from the alpine meadows following the freeze line down. They move into the Krumholtz trees where they are difficult to locate and therefore hunt. Does will readily respond to calling (fawn bleat) during this time, defending the fawn they believe is in trouble, sometimes a buck will respond as well.

Mid-September to Mid-October: Deer can be found feeding, putting on as much reserves as possible with the food sources changing depending on the elevations they live at and how early the frost comes. Does will readily respond to calling (fawn bleat) during this time, defending the fawn they believe is in trouble, sometimes a buck will respond as well. The deer change from their summer reddish coat to their winter gray-brown coat at his time. Early in this period hunting the

high alpine slopes can still be productive depending on frost timing.

Mid-October, Pre-rut Phase: The deer disappear during this time. I believe that the bucks are resting and determining the last of the dominance hierarchy. The does wean their fawns and their hormones must be changing towards estrus. Movement is limited or at night. If I take a good buck during this time, I believe it to be a great accomplishment. One might find small bucks tending does, hopeful to get a jump on the dominant bucks. Younger bucks will start rut earlier and end later.

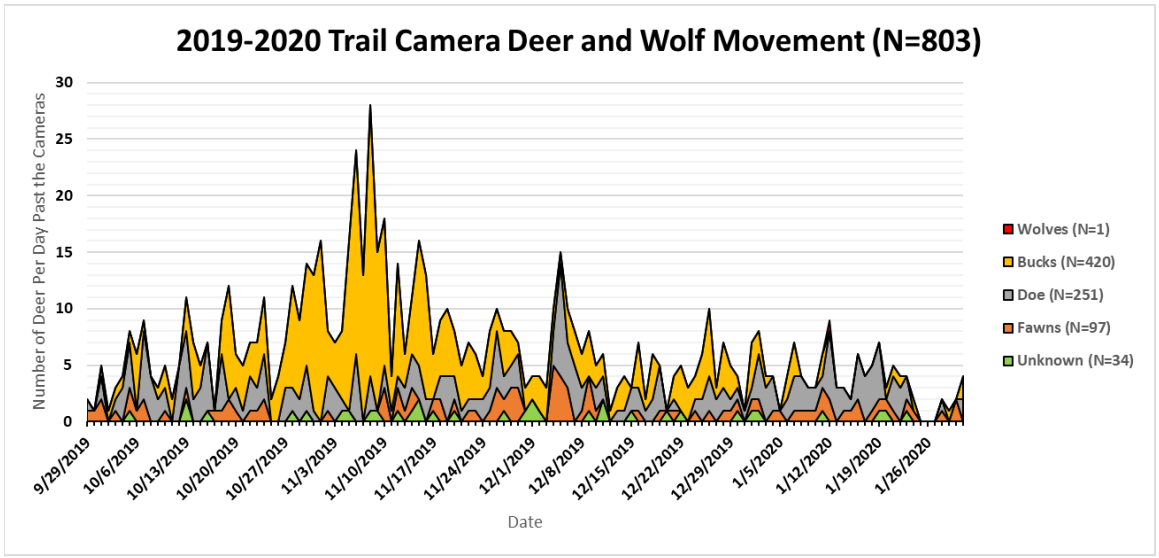
Last Week of October-First Week of November, Chasing Phase: This is one of my favorite times to hunt. The does will readily respond to the fawn bleat, often bringing one or more bucks in tow. Bucks will respond to a doe in estrus bleat, rattling, and grunt calls. Buck rubs can seem to appear everywhere. This is especially true for the end of the last week of October and the first week of November. I have taken some of my best bucks during this time. It is a great time to hunt the higher elevation timbered benches, still-hunting and calling as you go.

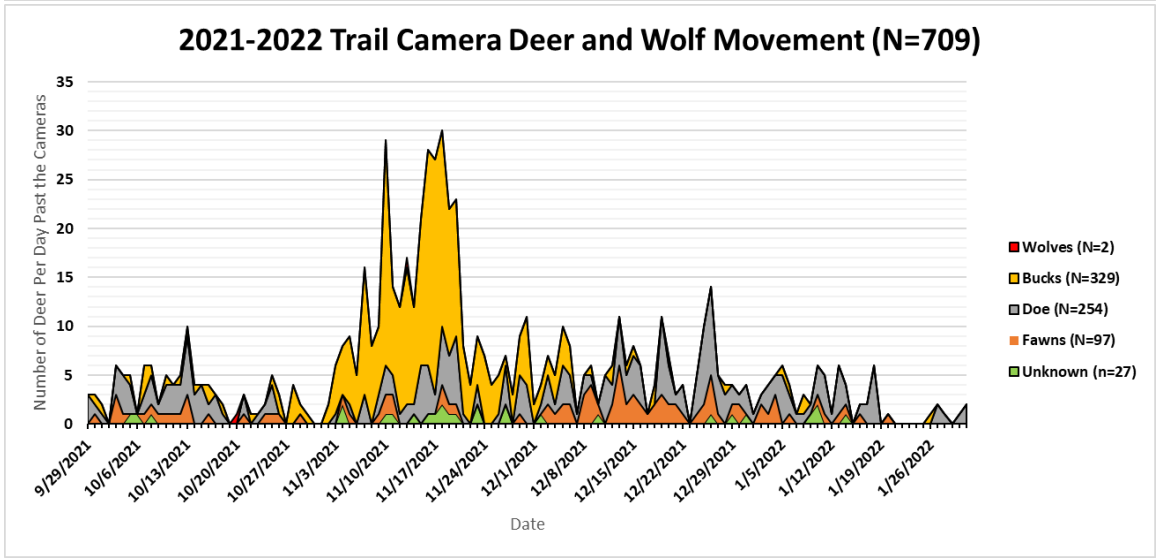


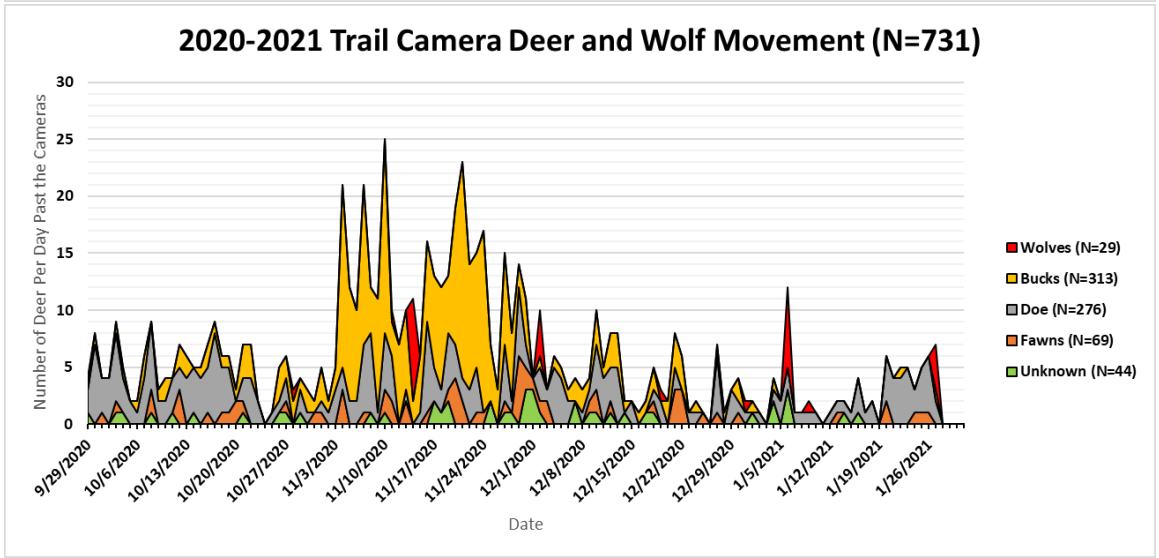
https://joestrailcams.com/deer-research/

Joe Piston from Ketchikan, Alaska has beautifully displayed the timing of the Chase Phase and Rut from 2012-2019 by recording deer doe and buck movements on his trail cameras in and around Ketchikan, Alaska. During the past few years, Joe has documented a Ketchikan rut cycle that has been 6-10 days earlier than my experience on Prince of Wales Island. It seems our rut has been peaking around the 10th to the 15th of November. You can follow "**Joe's Trail Cameras**" on Facebook. You can also see what is happing across Alaska by following "**Alaska Blacktail Forum**" on Facebook. Following Joe's lead I have been plotting deer activity trough time based on 20-24 trail cameras I have in the woods on Prince of Wales Island. Below on the net page are the results of those efforts.

Second and Third Weeks of November, The Rut: My experience is that the rut peaks between November 6-15th. The dominate bucks lock down on does. This can vary slightly with the year and weather patterns but not that much. This is the magical time that anything can happen since the bucks are actively looking for does. I hunt the doe populations in hopes of finding a dominate buck. I will go as high as the snow will allow. On the timbered slopes just below the sub-alpine areas the rut is in full swing. Still-hunting through the timber can be very productive. Some of the does will still respond to the fawn bleat, bucks will respond to the grunt call, rattling, or a doe estrus call. They may respond to a fawn bleat. Bucks may lose some of their natural tendencies and caution this time of year.


2019-2020 Trail Camera Deer and Wolf Movement (N=803)
Number of Deer Per Day Past the Cameras
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
9/29/2019
10/6/2019
10/13/2019
10/20/2019
10/27/2019
11/3/2019
11/10/2019
11/17/2019
11/24/2019
12/1/2019
12/8/2019
12/15/2019
12/22/2019
12/29/2019
1/5/2020
1/12/2020
1/19/2020
1/26/2020
Date
Wolves (N=1)
Bucks (N=420)
Doe (N=251)
Fawns (N=97)
Unknown (N=34)


2021-2022 Trail Camera Deer and Wolf Movement (N=709)
Number of Deer Per Day Past the Cameras
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
9/29/2021
10/6/2021
10/13/2021
10/20/2021
10/27/2021
11/3/2021
11/10/2021
11/17/2021
11/24/2021
12/1/2021
12/8/2021
12/15/2021
12/22/2021
12/29/2021
1/5/2022
1/12/2022
1/19/2022
1/26/2022
Date
Wolves (N=2)
Bucks (N=329)
Doe (N=254)
Fawns (N=97)
Unknown (n=27)


2020-2021 Trail Camera Deer and Wolf Movement (N=731)
Number of Deer Per Day Past the Cameras
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
9/29/2020
10/6/2020
10/13/2020
10/20/2020
10/27/2020
11/3/2020
11/10/2020
11/17/2020
11/24/2020
12/1/2020
12/8/2020
12/15/2020
12/22/2020
12/29/2020
1/5/2021
1/12/2021
1/19/2021
1/26/2021
Date
Wolves (N=29)
Bucks (N=313)
Doe (N=276)
Fawns (N=69)
Unknown (N=44)

Of note; myself and several others have witnessed bucks, when agitated during the rut, while approaching other bucks, make a roar/snort/wheeze similar to whitetail deer. Combining these calls with rattling and the Primos "Can" are proving effective.

The rut hunt of 2013 was one of my best rut huts in past years, I learned a lot and heard a lot of vocalizations. I changed my calling tactics, moving away from trying to find the does that were not in estrus yet to bring in the bucks by focusing on emulating a doe in estrus. I would call using a combination of Estrus™ Bleats from a Primos® Can, the aggressive grunt-roar and challenge-wheeze from a Primos Buck ROAR®, and rattling. I would work these into a 15-minute sequence. Then it is patience time after you quit calling. Remain motionless and vigil, often bucks will come in quietly 15-30 minutes after you stop calling. Many bucks may take over and hour and sometimes multiple bucks will come in. I still used a doe or fawn bleat incorporated with the above.

Late November to Mid-December, the Second Rut: Sometimes, like the fall of 2007/2008/2009, the rut seems extended, possibly due to the stress of the last 3 extended winters. We found rutting bucks tending does into December. Trail cameras have shown me multiple times that some of the largest bucks will show up from November 16-20th. Bucks that I have never seen before, absolutely huge bucks. Almost always at night, but not completely. I am wondering if these old mature bucks have been tending to does at higher elevations and come down to check on what has not been bred at lower elevations.

That brings me to daily deer movements. Trail Cameras have showed me that mature bucks head down from their bedding areas at sun set and return before sun rise. That is most of the time, during that November 16-20th period sometimes, depending on the doe, they linger into the early morning hours. You need to be out there.

A friend of mine tried prolonged rattling and light grunting during the last 2 weeks of November. He still hunted until he found large tending tracks in the snow. He then began aggressively rattling combined with light grunting every few minutes for 5 minutes. He had mature bucks respond from 35-50 minutes into the rattling sequence. This takes patience. Do not hurry.

The does that went un-bred during the primary rut come back into heat during this period. The second rut is much less active than the first but it still exists. In 2012, between December 16 th and 20th I found the second rut in full swing. The problem was that when you shot a buck his antlers fell off. Few does will respond to the call, bucks seem less likely to respond as well. I still-hunt the doe populations, since dominant bucks are still cruising. The bucks begin to lose their antlers mid-December. I have seen many one antlered bucks tending does from December 9th on. A few bucks will retain their antlers into early February. The position of the deer on the landscape is a function of snow depth. If the snowfall is deep at the higher elevation, then the deer are more concentrated on the lower slopes. If the snow is little, they are dispersed and hard to find. If you have a warm sunny day at this time, you can find deer bedded late in the clear-cuts absorbing the warming rays and feeding. This last season I found the deer in the broken

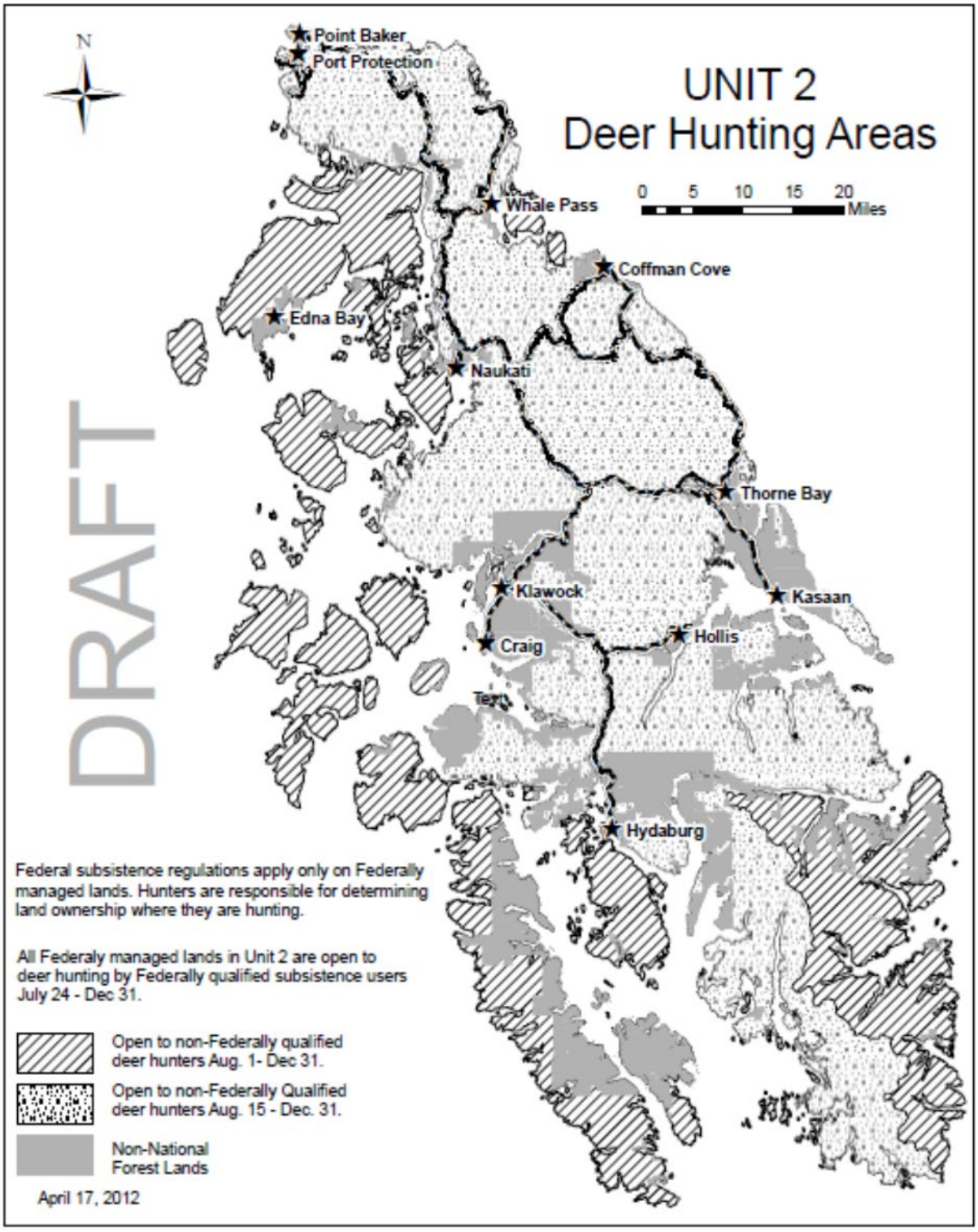
pockets of timber, where the cedars and muskegs occupied the mid-slopes. I do not think the deer move as much during this time, they begin conserving their reserves with the onset of winter and the end of the breeding cycle. Look at the deer movements represented on the above graphs.

I arrived in Southeast Alaska in July of 1990. There had been no killing winters since 1976. At that time, the Clear cuts were fresh and young and old growth habitat was still abundant. Deer numbers were incredible. Bear numbers were unbelievable and wolf numbers were high. One saw multiple bucks in a day of hunting and tons of does. One could hold out for a mature buck with confidence. Fast forward 32 years. Those fresh clearcuts are in stem exclusion phase, there have been some 15-20 additional timber sales reducing and fragmenting the old growth, and we have had 4 killing winters. Bear numbers have crashed but are rebounding and wolf numbers fluctuate with management. I personally believe the deer population is no more than 50 % of what I once experienced. The popular notion is to blames the wolves. We do not have a wolf problem; we have a habitat crisis. All is not lost, we desperately need radical, large-scale restoration of habitat!

I hope you find this information useful. Email me with any questions you have. You can contact me through www.sitkablacktail.org or at baichtal@muledeer.org

More information can be found on the pages of this website… https://sitkablacktail.org/

Rafe Hanson Photography©


UNIT 2
Deer Hunting Areas
N
0 5 10 15 20
Miles
Point Baker
Port Protection
Whale Pass
Coffman Cove
Edna Bay
Naukati
Thorne Bay
Klawock
Kasaan
Craig
Hollis
Hydaburg
DRAFT
Federal subsistence regulations apply only on Federally managed lands. Hunters are responsible for determining land ownership where they are hunting.
All Federaly managed lands in Unit 2 are open to deer hunting by Federally qualified subsistence users July 24 - Dec 31.
Open to non-Federally qualified deer hunters Aug. 1- Dec 31.
Open to non-Federally Qualified deer hunters Aug. 15 - Dec. 31.
Non-National Forest Lands
April 17, 2012