

Buxton Red Deer Farm

By Andy Cowan

I had intended to write a piece in this issue similar to the Glenhope Farm article in the last issue. Time and space has proven to be in short supply so I will only give a brief outline of how it has come to be that Buxton Red Deer Farm no longer has pure bred red deer in its paddocks. My farm management ideas will be in the next issue.

In the year 2000 Dr George Pietrzak, a Polish trained vet who then had a practice in Corrigin, WA, approached my brother and me with what we regarded as an interesting idea and opportunity. George had a small herd of sika deer in Poland which was being farmed in the north of Poland with the help of a government department – The Academy of Sciences. The idea was to collect embryos and semen from his herd and import them into Australia. To cut a long story short this is basically what happened.

I should point out here that I was very aware of the potential of in-breeding down the track. In an attempt to reduce this possibility, I had purchased two lots of hinds that were “totally unrelated”. One lot was bought from John Andrews (Lantec Pastoral) and the other from Ken

Sawyers near Boort. These red hinds, together with some of my own, were the basis of our AI program. We also AI'd some maral semen and some red deer semen from Poland – with mixed results. For the purpose of this exercise we AI'd about 90 hinds and ended up with 2 pure sika hinds and about 20 half bred hinds and 5 half bred stags. In December 2001 we had our first calves - pure sika and half bred sika - on the ground. In December 2002, the average weights of the half bred hinds was 63 kg and the average of the stags was 71 kg. In December the following year the averages of the yearling animals had risen to 104kg and 112kg respectively.

The sub-species of sika we have here is *Cervus nippon hortulorum*. A mature stag weighs about 120kg and a mature hind may weigh 80kg.

I had two trips to Poland. During the second trip, in 2002, with the help of George, we set up a deer farm on another property where both embryos and semen were going to be collected. Regrettably the material gathered from the second farm is still in Poland and, until recently, could not be exported because of Bluetongue virus concerns in the EU.

I have farmed both red and fallow deer here. I always cull on temperament first, genetics second and finally the phenotype. I choose this order for a number of reasons. Firstly, if any animal does not like my style of



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management and is constantly being a nuisance (standing up to me in the yards, crawling under/ jumping over fences, not having calves), they are off! Secondly, as animals outlive their genetic use, as determined by the amount of space available to me, they are also off. Thirdly, when I have the number of breeding hinds needed for a particular purpose, I then cull on their physical appearance or phenotype. All three of these processes are constantly being applied as animal behaviour can often change.

It is difficult to describe the behavioural characteristics of the sika. Bearing in mind that most of the animals we have are cross-bred, I would say the behaviour of the sika is similar to a combination of red and fallow.

Most of the animals I have behave quite "normally" in the paddock. They are curious and quick. They smell gate latches when I leave the paddock. They follow me out of the paddock when they are called. They are a little upset with a change in routine. They chase the feed trailer and jump up on bales of hay when being supplementary fed. The main point of difference between handling red and sika is most noticeable in the yards. I always work stock in the pen. Red hinds, and stags at velvet time, can be pushed around quite easily by grabbing their nose or using my hip on their hip to move them.

My first real lesson with sika/sika cross animals came when we were AI'ing the half-breds for the first time. With red deer we simply walked into the pen and injected the anaesthetic into the hind that was two animals away. This was simply a precaution so that if the hind did react in some way I would have another hind in between this animal and myself for protection.

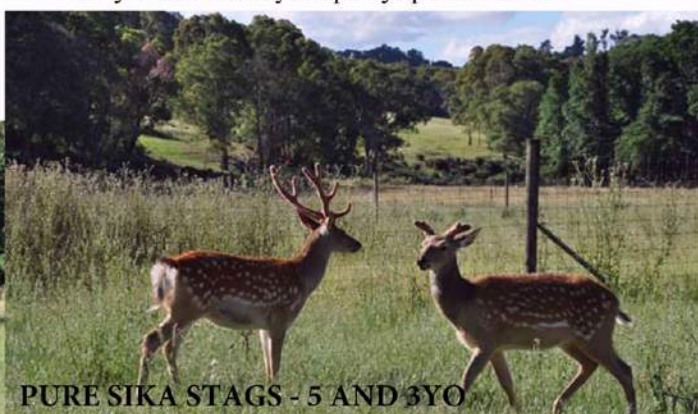
This approach does not work with sika deer. You must put the hind in the crush and give her the injection there. In fact, I would recommend that you put them in the crush for any physical inspection. They have a very strong herding instinct and need to be handled slowly. They obviously find comfort in being part of a mob. I have found that, similar to fallow, they respond well if you talk constantly to them (to maintain their focus on you), move slowly (so that they are not startled) and have good yards and patience. All these help to keep the animals calm and to make them easier to work. Admittedly, I only had about 40 fallow deer here for a while, but I ended up handling them the same way as I do the sika. I ended up working the fallow in the same yards as the red deer – six foot high walls and full light in pens that averaged about 100 square feet in area.

There has been a lot of water under the bridge since we started this project in 2000. We have had limited success in building up the pure bred herd. One of our first two hinds born died from rumen acidosis where the lining of the stomach was "burnt" – sadly a management error! One of our hinds had six sons in a row - not a good start when you want to build a herd. We have tried MIVET without success. Three of our pure stags have been killed or died from misadventure - BUT we push on!! This season I am expecting our first F5 calves, but the majority of our calves this year will be F4 (15/16).

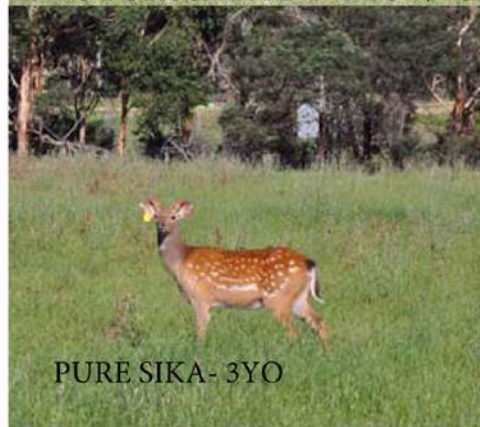
I have included a number of photos of sika and sika/cross animals in order to give you some idea why I believe they are pretty special animals.



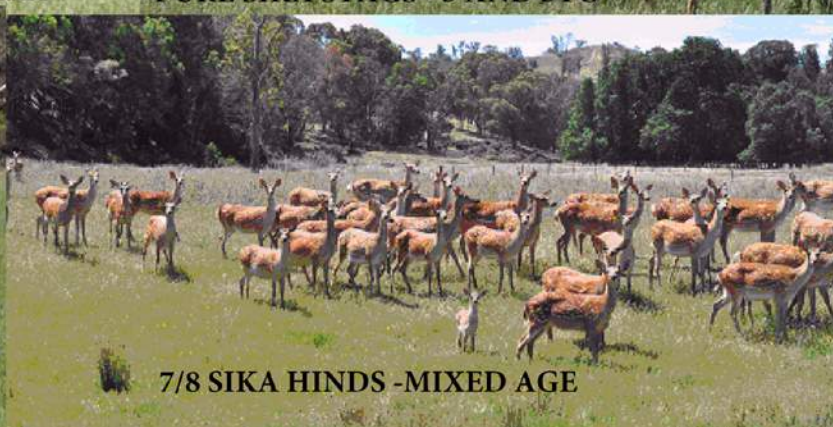
5 YO PURE SIKA AND 2 YO 3/4 SIKA



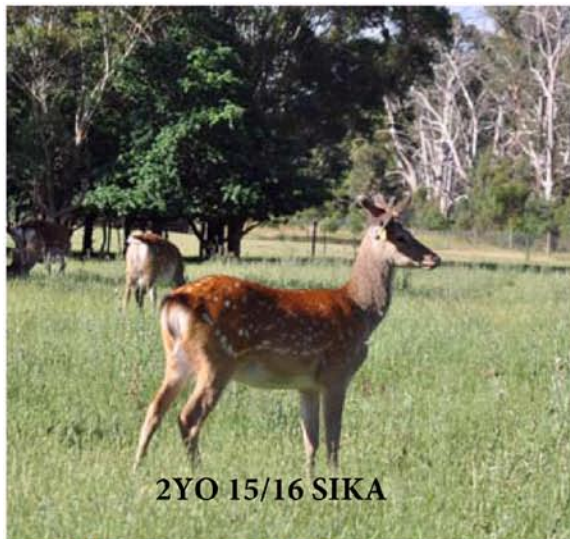
PURE SIKA STAGS - 5 AND 3YO



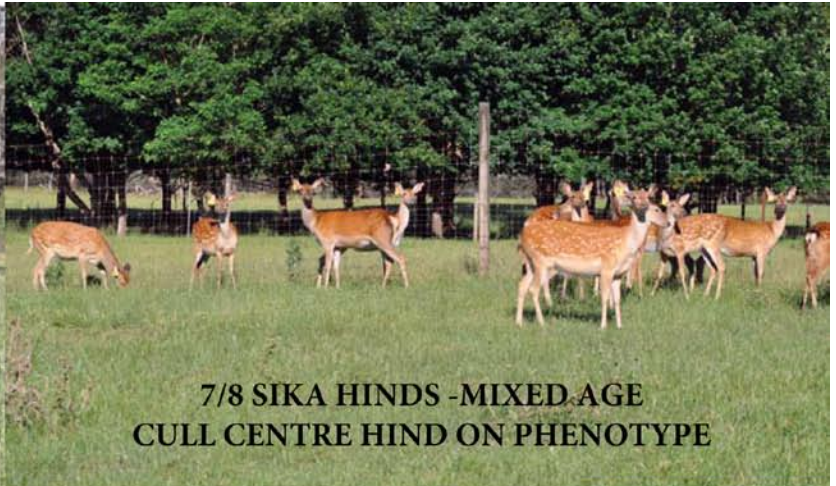
PURE SIKA- 3YO



7/8 SIKA HINDS - MIXED AGE



2YO 15/16 SIKA



7/8 SIKA HINDS - MIXED AGE
CULL CENTRE HIND ON PHENOTYPE

SIKA



1/2 AND 3/4 SIKA



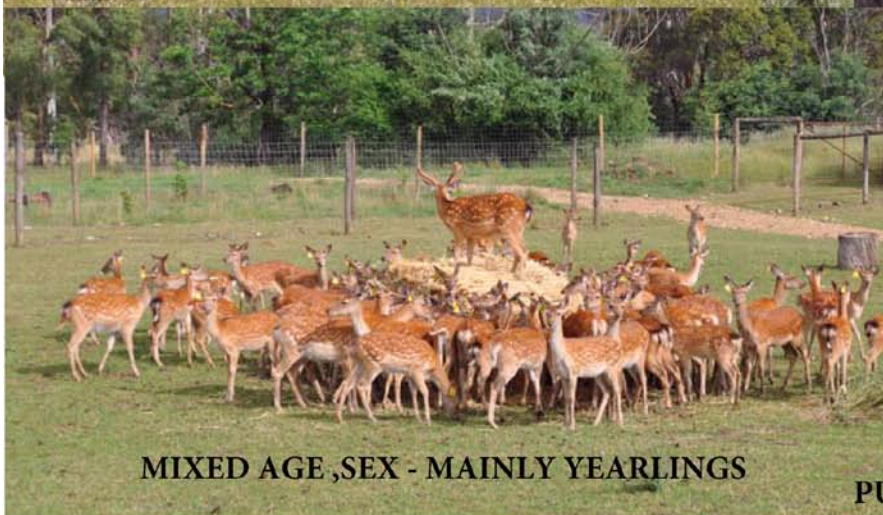
PURE SIKA AND 2YO 15/16



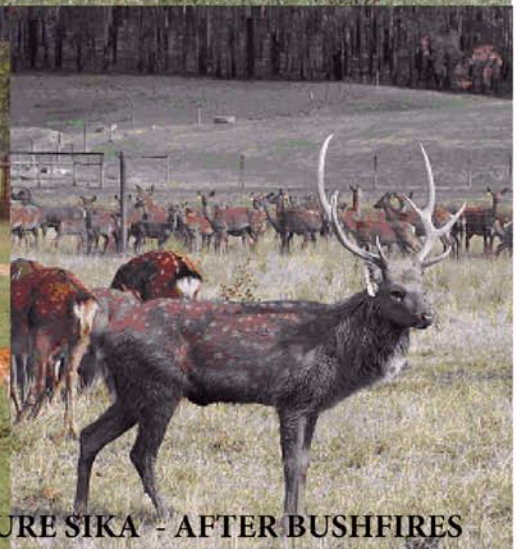
7/8 SIKA HINDS - MIXED AGE



3/4 SIKA



MIXED AGE ,SEX - MAINLY YEARLINGS



PURE SIKA - AFTER BUSHFIRES