

# Sports / Outdoors

## The exotic deer nobody knows

We live in the very heart of Texas' exotic-game country. More free-ranging foreign beasts are frolicking around in Kerr County than anywhere else in Texas.

Since I installed an automatic feeder outside my bathroom window, I've spotted six different species of exotics in my yard. Three of these critters were sika deer — a mature buck, a spike and a doe. None has shown up a second time, at least during daylight.

Sika (pronounced "see-KAH!") with explosive emphasis on the second syllable: it means "deer" in Japanese) must be the most overlooked of the free-ranging exotic species. One reason is that it's one of the shyest and tends to go totally nocturnal pretty quickly if it gets too much attention.

And how much is too much? Not much! It's not impossible that some Kerr Countians who have never seen a sika deer in their lives have one or more living on their property. They may have seen sika tracks without recognizing them; they're longer and narrower than whitetail tracks, with very pointed toes.

In browsing among my references on exotic game animals, I find such adjectives as "boisterous," "bold," "scrappy," and "pugnacious" — seldom used to describe any kind of deer — applied to sikas.

I know from personal experience that a sika buck in hard antler can be aggressive, even potentially dangerous, to an unarmed human on foot. A few Hill Country hunters have been "treed" atop cars, trucks or deer stands by belligerent sika bucks. Even sika does or bucks without their antlers must be handled with caution because, like axis deer, they bite!

Sikas are animals of thick forest, and so have evolved the whitetail-deer strategy of remaining motionless rather than fleeing when surprised in cover. This, with their seeming arrogance, makes them fairly easy to hunt if one can handle his rifle quickly on short notice.

Unlike most species of deer, the dark red meat of a sika in good condition is tasty, marbled and juicy. Sikas withstand cold weather better than the tropical



Photos by John Wootters

Sika deer are one of the most interesting but least discussed or hunted of Texas' exotic deer species. Far from being meek and timid like most deer, they are cocky and aggressive and may use both antlers and teeth to defend themselves, even from humans.

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John Wootters

exotics, and even tend to get fat on well-managed Hill Country pastures.

Sikas and elk are closely enough related that the two can hybridize and produce viable young, although apparently this is quite rare. Elk-like, sika bucks create and roll in wallows during the rut and produce a loud piercing whistle which is their equivalent to the elk's bugle.

Sikas originated in East Asia — Manchuria, China, Korea, the Japanese islands, Formosa and Vietnam — with about 13 subspecies recognized.

Except for a few purebred herds of the big Manchurian Dybowski's sika, almost all Texas sikas are crossbred Japanese X Formosan specimens. These have a reddish-brown coat with white spots and rump patch in summer, becoming a uniform blackish-brown with a black stripe down the spine in winter, without spots but still retaining the contrasting rump patch.

There are many mysteries about sika importations, however, some of which may have occurred as early as the '30s. My first sika buck, on the Moss Ranch in Llano County, was ebony-black, having literally not a single white hair anywhere on his body. There is only one subspecies of sika deer answering that description in the wild, found only on the Ryukyu Islands south of Japan. Their scientific name is karamae. No records exist of the importa-



The author with a very fine sika buck harvested on the YO Ranch with a handgun.

tion of any live karamae specimens anywhere in Texas, and the living members of the family that owned the ranch had no memory of where their original sikas came from, when, or where they had been released. The fences were in bad shape and that sika population might have migrated into the Moss Ranch from miles away.

The lingering question is: was mine an unusual melanistic Japanese or hybrid deer — or an ultra-rare specimen of the mysterious karamae, an endangered species now? Only a DNA analysis could furnish that answer, but DNA was not even a gleam in a scientist's eye when I pulled the trigger on that buck.

**John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson's hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for "Shooting Times," "Rifle," "Handloader," "Guns & Ammo" and Peterson's "Hunting."**