Kaweka sika control in hunters’ hands

Aerial sika deer control in the Kaweka Forest Park is being grounded for at least the next three years. From 2016 – 2019, the Department of Conservation’s Hawke’s Bay District is ceasing helicopter control in the area in favour of allowing recreational hunters the opportunity to control sika deer populations.

Aerial sika deer control has taken place over 20,000 ha of the park, annually for the past 18 years. Managing the sika deer population is key to the success of the Kaweka Mountain Beech Project, a DOC-led initiative to restore this native beech species in the park.

One of the main objectives of the project is to increase visitor use in the area and actively promote and enhance all recreational opportunities.

“Our local community is passionate about the Kaweka Forest Park,” says DOC Ranger Kellie Mayo. “We’re excited this trial will provide enhanced hunting opportunities as well as a chance to help the beech forest recover.”

It is considered recreational hunting can keep sika deer numbers at an acceptable level in balance with their habitat as long as consistent and targeted effort is applied.

“DOC will re-evaluate this trial in 2019 to see if aerial control needs to be reintroduced. Until then, this is a chance for hunters to take as many sika deer as possible,” she said.

Keeping huts warm at no extra cost

A new agreement with Helisika will see Oamaru Hut in the Kaimanawa Forest Park stocked with firewood at no added cost.

The arrangement means firewood is now “back-loaded” into the hut when Helisika are picking up clients.

Helisika and DOC enjoy a positive working relationship, often collaborating on didymo testing the backcountry rivers and on track and hut maintenance.

As a “Standard” category hut, the 12 bunk Oamaru Hut has mattresses, wood burner, water supply and toilet all for $5 per night; only serviced huts ($15 per night) are supplied with firewood. There are four huts in the Kaimanawa Forest Park, of which only the Boyd is fully serviced.
OSPRI spring operations summary

An agreement has been reached between DOC and OSPRI (formerly TBfreeNZ) which allows for both reasonable hunter access to the Kaimanawa Recreational Hunting Area (RHA) and the planned OSPRI bovine tuberculosis (TB) control programme.

The planned aerial application of 1080 baits to the area south of the Kaipo Valley to Cascade Stream track - around 1/3 of the RHA - will be reassessed in 2017. This is in recognition of the impact on recreational hunting.

The remainder of the currently proposed Kaimanawa aerial 1080 operation (excluding the previously postponed Kaweka East operation) will proceed as planned during September 2016. Deer repellent will be used over the entire area.

OSPRI's TBfree programme works toward the eradication of TB. This requires large-scale control of possums, the main wildlife transmitters of TB infection to cattle and deer.

For up-to-date information on animal pest operations contact the contractor noted on the DOC pesticide summary, or the relevant DOC office.

Rangitaiki Conservation Area a.k.a SF70

Rangitaiki Conservation Area located on State Highway 5 to the east of Taupō is a complex and fragile ecosystem. It is also highly valued as a recreation spot, and these two values are causing DOC significant management issues.

Understandably the public wants to make the most of the area, but the Department is currently losing the battle to protect the ecosystem from the impacts of public activity.

1 Off-road damage clearly visible after heavy rain.

To further complicate the situation, the current main vehicle access crosses a section of private land. Some users are failing to respect this which causes unacceptable impacts to the interests of neighbouring land owners.

From a conservation perspective, Rangitaiki Conservation Area contains a nationally important area of monoao dominated frost flat heath land. The site also includes Te Papa Mire, a large wetland with a unique mixture of montane bog and lowland swamp species. However, due to the nature of the terrain, the area is very popular with off road vehicles which have, and continue to cause, significant impacts.

All-terrain vehicles and motorcycles damage the low growing vegetation, and can cause erosion as well. Adding to that is the availability of duck shooting and deer hunting in the area which means many people have a keen interest in accessing the site, which further adds to the impacts of vehicle use across this fragile landscape.

The vegetation type and the off road vehicle use means that there is also a high risk from accidental fire which would have a devastating effect on the Rangitaiki Conservation Area and adjoining private land.
DOC is working with NZ Police and neighbouring land owners to control the issues, however it is recognised that the public will have to play a key part in deciding how to protect this special place in the future.

Kaimanawa Kaweka Snow Bomb

The snow storm that hit early August brought chaos to the Central North Island causing power outages, road closures and blizzard conditions.

Throughout both the Kaweka and Kaimanawa Forest Parks this has meant extensive clean-up work.

Hunters camping at Clements Road End when the storm hit on August 6 became trapped when the snow damage made the road impassable. Rangers from the Central Plateau team worked with heavy machinery to clear the vegetation and snow, taking two days to reach them, opening just 6km of road.

2 The team reaches the first trapped vehicle which sustained serious damage attempting to escape the storm.

Throughout the ordeal the team were in cell-phone contact, reporting that spirits were high among those snowed in. One man was so grateful to be extricated he even offered a donation to DOC – this was all in a day’s work for the rangers however so was declined.

Fortunately, all those trapped were well prepared for winter conditions – a good reminder to plan for the worst when in the backcountry.

Track clearance will continue to take place over the coming months in both forest parks. When out hunting this spring take care – expect windfalls and snow damage, some tracks may even be impassable. Report any major damage to the local DOC office.

NB: Clements Mill Road is now completely open

Kiwi Avoidance training for dogs

Just a reminder that some of the prime hunting areas around Taupō also have kiwi in them, and as a result you may need to get your dog avoidance trained, as along with making sure it is micro-chipped and registered by your local council.

The spots which require dogs to be kiwi-aversion trained to obtain a hunting permit include the Kaweka Forest Park and Ruapehu hunting areas (Tongariro, Erua and Rangataua Conservation Areas).

Information about avoidance training is available from your local DOC office.

Night vision not ok on DOC land

You’ll probably see a bunch of night vision scopes and optics gear for sale at the Sika Show this year which offers the promise of more deer for your BBQ. Just be aware that any hunting in the hours of darkness is illegal on public land.

While spotlighting is the obvious no-no under this rule, newly emerging technologies such as night vision and thermal imaging gear cannot be used for hunting on public land.
Please consider this if you are looking at purchasing some of this new kit, as it can only legally be used on private land with the permission of the land owner.

Hunting Paradise
by Maz Taylor-Gregory

16 year old Maz Taylor-Gregory describes a hunting adventure in the Kaweka Forest Park with her dad Mark.

I guess it’s hard to explain paradise. For me it’s freedom, surrounded by nature’s creation and the sound of nothing but morning bird song, the whistling of the wind in the trees and the odd fly buzzing past your ear. That’s my description of paradise.

The Otutu hut was great. It had all the essentials and nothing more. It wasn’t overdone and gave the true feeling of a New Zealand backcountry hut.

We did a few day hunts and got to know where the deer were and found our way around the place. The sika were as elusive as ever so we only got the one for the trip – dad shot it right on sunset on day two – but we did manage to spot another seven.

Day four was the best by far. We woke up at 5am to tackle the challenging climb up Manson Hill and around the tops. It was worth it though; as we reached the summit the sun was rising and we saw it touch patches of the hill for the first time that morning. It was going to be a beautiful day.

During the hike we spent a lot of time stopping and admiring the views – it really felt like we were on top of the world! We made it back to the hut by 4pm and I was proud to accomplish the full loop. I found this opportunity well worth it and I would do it again in a heartbeat.

It really refreshed me and made me realise once again that New Zealand is one of the true paradises of the world. Sometimes all you need to do is get away from the cities and social life and take a walk in nature.

*The trip was won by dad Mark at the Sika Show competition. The winning sika stag measured 198.5 on the Douglas score taking first prize for head shot on public conservation land. Flights in and out were donated by East Kaweka Helicopters.*

3 Maz on the hunt for the elusive sika

We started off in a helicopter. Flying over acres of farm land and then into the Kaweka Forest Park. We made our way up the ranges, over amazing tree tops and rocky outcrops to land at the hut site which would be our home for the next few days. I’d only been in a helicopter once before and I must say; everything has a much more beautiful view from above!

4 Mark with dog Ghana