



# Sika sanction



**Brian Phipps follows Teresa Davis on her quest to bag all six UK deer species – next up is sika**

If you mention Dorset to the majority of UK deer stalkers, they normally mutter one thing: sika.

This Asian deer was introduced from the Far East to Britain in around 1896. The *Nippon nippon* sub-species of sika was released on Brownsea Island, in Poole Harbour, and from there they soon swam to the mainland and quickly colonised the surrounding countryside. It is thought that the sika population in the Poole Basin has increased from less than 1,000 in the 1960s to more than 4,000 today. They are a herd species and 40-60 animals will gather to feed or ruminate in a field of choice outside of the breeding season. Perhaps as a result of culling pressure, sika have expanded from their preferred range of heath and scrub and adapted to adjacent pasture, arable land and woodland. In Scotland they have also expanded rapidly from their original area of release near Pebbles, and appreciate modern commercial spruce plantations.

In late October last year, I left my home at 3.30am in the pitch darkness of a moonless night. The relentless rain showed no signs of abating as I pressed on towards the meet. An hour and a half later I was greeted at the rendezvous by Teresa Davis and a local professional stalker who would guide us on what looked set to be a very wet stalk indeed.

"It's not a good start," said a voice from under a dripping bush hat. "But it's worth a go – the rut's full on and the stags are calling well. If they play ball we shouldn't have too much trouble finding them." We moved off and drove into the darkness, deep within the Poole Basin, soon arriving at a privately managed estate covering 1,500 acres.

After chatting for a while in the forlorn hope that the rain might ease, we bit the bullet and headed into the wind. Within seconds our waterproof gear was getting a thorough testing – I can attest that the Härkila Pro Hunter suit does what it

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says on the tin, and Teresa's new Musto jacket, the Whisper, proved well worth the money.

Our stalker led us into the foreboding forestry as the first crack of light smeared the eastern sky. Teresa was using the estate rifle, a custom .270 made by gun and rifle maker Mike Rainback of Owermoigne, Dorchester (01305 853737). It was scoped with a Schmidt & Bender 3-12x42 and completed with an SAE Ultra moderator.

A high-pitched whistle erupted from the heathland beyond the trees, and within seconds we heard a reply. Our guide told us to be quick on our feet yet silent too, and in no uncertain terms he told me "not to frighten every living thing with your camera shutter". I packed the Cannon away and we moved on post-haste.

The terrain we emerged on was typical sika country: damp, acidic heath with gorse scrub.

**Quality optics: Zeiss 8x42  
rangefinder binoculars**



**Seeking sika: glassing the heath**





Steady aim: Teresa marks her quarry



Bullet and the beast:  
the Norma 130 grain

But first we had to negotiate the trees. The forest floor was littered with fallen branches and leaves from the recent rough weather and our pace soon slowed necessarily as we carefully picked our way through, each groan and crack underfoot echoing through the trees. I wondered if we were already being watched.

Stopping every 30 yards to pause and listen, the eerie whistling calls were further in than first

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thought. We soon ventured out on to the heather-carpeted heath as the watery sun was trying its damndest to break through the low clouds. Standing on the very edge of the woodland, I began scanning the heath with my Zeiss 8x42 rangefinder binoculars (Zeiss sales, 07713 784365). These quality optics make short work of dismal light conditions and they instantly provided me with a crystal-clear sight picture.

About 200 yards away I spied a fine sika stag staring straight back at me, watching us for a while. He was an impressive eight-pointer but soon bounded away, taking his harem of hinds with him to a safer place. Unperturbed, our stalking guide

decided to venture further onto the heath. Distant whistles and the clash of antlers encouraged us to push through the unforgiving, head-high gorse in search of our quarry. An unseen approach proved to be less difficult this time and with the rut in full swing, the deer obviously had other things on their mind.

Four stags soon came into view, milling around a group of hinds 300 yards away. They were all keen on being the dominant stag and having the privileges that went with it. Approaching the group so that we were at a suitable distance from the stags was almost too easy. The new morning sunlight showcased the sika stags in all their





hinds. "The one on the right," whispered the stalker in Teresa's ear.

She did not need telling twice. The stag was now standing sideways on and offered her a textbook shot. A half-second later the stag reared, rushing off to collapse dead, its heart destroyed by a perfectly-placed 130 grain Norma bullet. I could not detect any further movement through the binoculars, hearing a slick reload as Teresa worked the action. We wait patiently for a few more moments but there is no further movement from the stag. Approaching from the rear, Teresa touched the stag's eye with the stalking sticks. We confirmed its death by the lack of retinal action, and all admire her first sika stag.

A fine six-pointer, he was about three years old and weighed about 80lb field dressed. He was an ideal cull stag, and juvenile stags make very good venison indeed. The rising autumnal sun dispersed the rain clouds as we dragged the stag back to the vehicle. Teresa gripped the warm .270 case, all smiles once again. Another deer had been neatly despatched; another species to notch on her stick. Only Chinese water deer and muntjac are left for Teresa to stalk and then she will have completed the list of UK species – that's not bad for a girl who only started stalking this season.

Sika stalking in the Poole Basin requires some-

thing of a status quo between the forestry, farmers, and deer managers. It is true that sika deer do a tremendous amount of damage to agricultural interests, and forestry suffers too. Managed correctly, the herd will remain healthy and provide a suitable harvest of venison, but there must be a happy medium, with sika numbers kept at reasonable levels in order to ensure that damage remains minimal. It certainly looks like this species is here to stay, so it's time to manage it as an asset. ■

For further information about wildlife artist Teresa Davis: [www.teresadavis.co.uk](http://www.teresadavis.co.uk).

Cull stag: a four year old six-pointer



magnificence, while the hinds' pelage of ashen grey stood out starkly against that of the black stags.

As we were in no hurry, we decided to take a back seat and watch the action develop. Stalking is not all about grassing the first beast you come across and we were all happy to watch these magnificent stags doing what they do best at the height of the rut. It was a fantastic experience, watching these parading stags and nervous hinds that didn't know if they were coming or going. Our guide, after careful consideration, eventually decided on taking a particular stag now 125 yards away according to the Zeiss RF binoculars.

Teresa worked the bolt and chambered a round into the .270 Rainback, placing the rifle gently upon the shooting sticks. Stepping back slightly, she brought the rifle firmly into her right shoulder. Two fine six-point stags walked in front of us, parallel to each other, indicating an imminent fight. Within seconds a ferocious battle commenced and the guide tells Teresa to be ready. The fight only lasts for a few seconds, leaving a victor to claim his



Two UK species to go: Teresa and her first sika stag