

Response to Humans

After 30 years of stalking and observing sambar, I have concluded that farm fringe stags are constantly avoiding humans and therefore, can be extremely difficult to hunt as they have learnt every trick in the book. They are considerably more adept at avoiding humans than their deep forest relatives who have comparatively limited interaction with hunters.

Author

Prehistoric art found in caves in India shows the hunting of deer, antelope, wild boar and other animals by prehistoric man. These reflections on our past, which date from 10,000 years ago - to the tenth century A.D., conjure up images of the Gond - native Indian - with spear, axe and club, lying in wait at an evening watering hole, or stalking them in their daytime retreat.

Woven through the tapestry of our past, this thread reminds us that sambar have been hunted relentlessly by our prehistoric forbears for food, hides for clothing and shelter and antlers and bones from which implements and weapons were fashioned. This evolutionary predator/prey relationship must have contributed greatly to developing the survival skills for which sambar are revered.

So it should come as no surprise that modern sambar possesses an instinctive fear of man, and, so as not to become our next meal, they have become expert at eluding us. Hence the daily routine of sambar is designed to avoid humans. In fact they have become so proficient at it that we have great difficulty harvesting them. Proof of this is the low success rate amongst hunters, with many failing to take a stag in ten and even twenty years of committed pursuit. This is not meant as criticism, merely acknowledgement that sambar are an awesome game animal who have developed an uncanny knack of instantly behaving in a variety of different ways to avoid humans. This repertoire of strategies - tested and perfected throughout the ages - is described in detail in the chapter 'Anti-Predator Strategies'.

Farm Fringe v Deep Forest Sambar

My experience has taught me that farm fringe sambar are constantly avoiding humans and therefore, can be extremely difficult to hunt as they seem to have learnt every trick in the book and can become nocturnal in a heart beat. In fact, I believe they are better attuned at avoiding humans than their deep forest cousins who have limited interaction with hunters.

Stags living in State and National Parks adjoining farmland are rarely seen in paddocks, even though they are not shot at or harassed, and hunting in the surrounding forest is prohibited. It seems the natural instinct of these animals is hard-wired to avoid humans. During the day they will stay in the forest around farms and may not venture onto paddocks in daylight even when there is no hunting pressure. As a result, farmers have had sambar living in forest around their farms for many years without knowing it. In several instances, stags of around 10 years of age with 30in antlers have been harvested around such farms.

Right: Bruce Parnall was following the tracks of this stag which unbeknown to him was bedded in a gully head just 30m below him. Spooked by Bruce, he leaped from his bed and galloped up the side of the gully head for 30m before stopping briefly on the spur line, giving Bruce the few seconds needed to capture this splendid image. After looking back to see what had disturbed him, the stag vanished as quickly as he had appeared. Bruce was 5km from the nearest road so this stag was definitely a 'deep forest' deer. As Bruce said, 'if he had smelled him, or if he had been a farm fringe stag, there is no way he would have stopped.'

