

[From Winter 1996-97]

Chincoteague Refuge Sikas

"Don't those little deer ever get any bigger?" No they don't. And those little deer-like animals are really Asian elk known as sikas.

The sikas range over the entire refuge but a small group is frequently seen near the administration building hoping for a treat from a visitor.

How can you be sure it's a sika and not a white-tailed deer? The trade mark of the sika is the bright white shield on its rump - a powder-puff behind. The white-tailed deer has a brown tail with a white underside, which it raises like a flag when alarmed.



There's a considerable size difference too. Sikas are two to two and a half feet at the shoulder, weighing about sixty to eighty pounds - little guys. The whitetails may reach three and a half feet at the shoulder, and in some areas may weigh as much as two hundred and fifty pounds. The white tails on the refuge may reach only one hundred and forty pounds because their food supply is sparse here on a barrier island.

The antlers are decidedly different as well. Sikas' slant backward while the whitetails' antlers have a forward beam.

The coloring is also distinctive, as the sikas are dark brown with lighter spots on either side of their back bones. These spots may remain throughout the animal's life. Their winter coat is darker. Whitetailed deer are spotted when young but as adults are tan or reddish brown in summer, grey brown in winter. They're decorated with white on the belly and throat and have nose bands and eye rings of white as well as white linings in their ears.

Next question: Where did the sikas come from? They came from Asia originally. On this coast, we have Clemment Henry of Cambridge, Maryland, to thank for the sikas' introduction to the Eastern Shore. He brought a few here in the early nineteen hundreds and apparently kept them as pets. They multiplied and in 1916 he released some of them on James Island, establishing a population in Dorchester County.

In 1920, Dr. Charles Law of Berlin, Maryland and bought five of the small elk from "a man in Cambridge," according to the record. We're guessing that the man was Clemment Henry.

During the period of Law's ownership of the sikas, three young were born and one of the original males died. A boy scout troop was said to have released some of the sikas here in the nineteen twenties. That story had not been confirmed until 1992, at which time Larry Points, Chief of Interpretation at Assateague Island National Seashore, interviewed an eighty-two year old man who had been in that boy scout troop in Ocean City, Maryland.

On September 30th, 1992, Owen Mumford told Larry Points that his scout leader, a Methodist minister whom he calls "Preacher Truitt," went "somewhere in Delaware" to acquire some sikas. He recalls that Truitt went to Wilmington or Dover, but it may well have been to Cambridge or Berlin, Maryland.

They had about a dozen sikas, Mr. Mumford recalls. He believes there were ten females and two males. These animals were taken by the scouts to the boardwalk in Ocean City, Maryland, and confined under the old pier. The scouts charged the public to look at the sikas - twenty-five cents for adults and fifty cents for children. That summer the scouts raised seven hundred dollars showing the sikas and took a trip on the proceeds. Business apparently slacked off, but the expense, of feeding the animals continued. So the leader and some of the boys in the troop, including Owen Mumford, took the sikas to Assateague Island and released them "on some flat lands". Larry Points suggests that this may have been at "Fox Levels." Mr. Mumford was between ten and fourteen at the time, so the release must have been between 1920 and 1924. Later on, "a man from Berlin" released more. Mr. Mumford believes seven to nine animals were released then for the purpose of hunting them.

They are exotics, not native to the area, and so have no natural enemies, no predators who fancy young elk. The wolves and cougars are long since gone from this area.

The herd on James Island suffered from over population, their numbers exceeding the food supply of the island habitat. A die-off occurred in 1957 with one hundred and sixty one sikas dying in just one winter.

We have no exact census of the sikas at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, but the estimate is between 1,100 and 1,400.

The whitetails are largely browsing animals, eating tender shoots of trees and shrubs. Sikas are both grazers and browsers.

In Japan, sikas were once hunted for their antlers. The hunt was so extensive that the sikas neared extinction. Today the Japanese protect them as a national treasure. In Russia, the population was once so large that the government considered re-establishing the wolf population to keep the sikas in check.

In some countries, sikas are raised domestically for their antlers. The velvet, which is the soft furry skin on the growing antlers, is scraped off and ground up to make a tonic. Ten injections are given the patient as a general stimulant.

You may encounter sikas in petting zoos around this country. What sounds do they make? They're quiet animals most of the time. During mating they make a bugling sound, but a whistling sound is used as an alarm signal.

Here on the refuge, they usually feed at night time, spending their days loafing in the greenbrier thickets. The few around headquarters seem to feed during the day, but that's because they've grown accustomed to begging from visitors. They are so appealing that even the most blasè visitor is tempted to feed them. Please don't give in to temptation.

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