



HARTLAND™
HUNTING & OUTDOORS

FREE FIELD GUIDE · NSW · EDITION 1 · OCTOBER 2026

THE NSW RUTS AND HOW TO HUNT THEM

When each deer species ruts in NSW, which public land to start on, when the best heads are about, and how to hunt each one. Built from the DPIRD rules and Australian hunters' reports, with anything unconfirmed clearly marked.

FALLOW · RED · RUSA · SAMBAR · CHITAL



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FREE TO PRINT AND SHARE

Take it hunting, pass it around the camp, pin it in the shed. Rules change, so check Hunt NSW before every hunt.

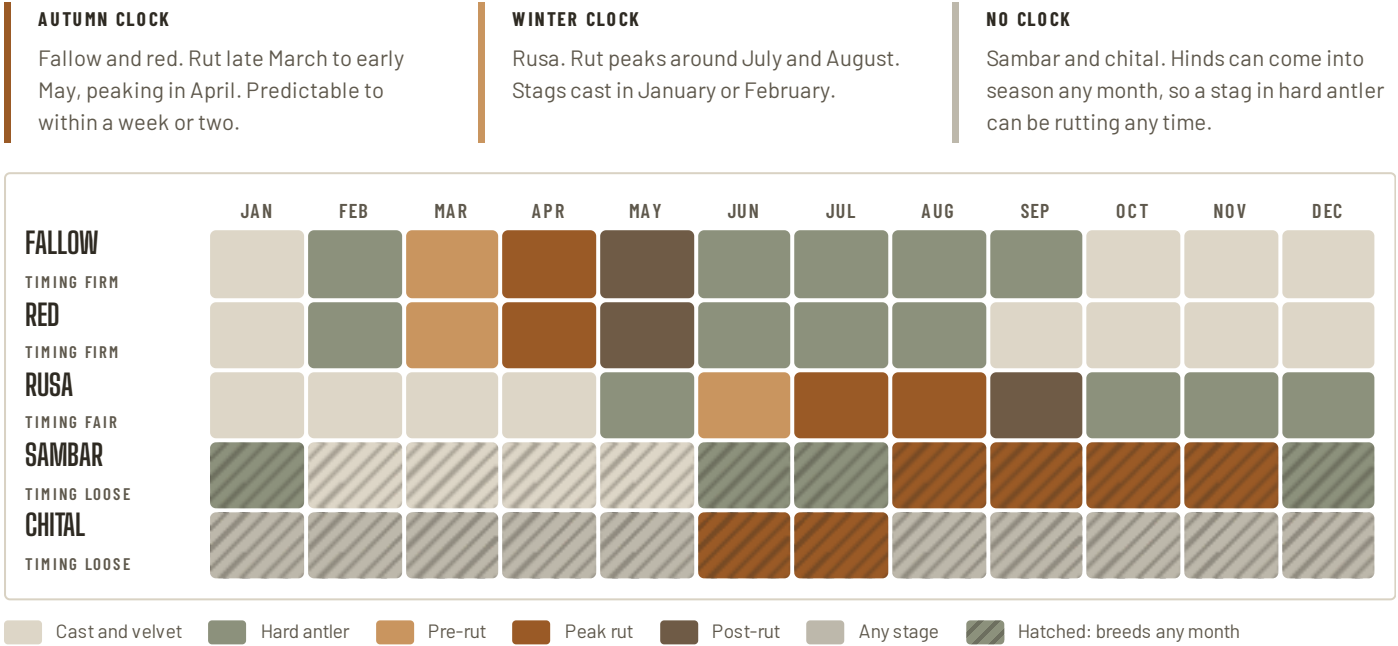
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TWO CLOCKS AND TWO WILDCARDS

NSW deer run on different calendars depending on where they came from. Red and fallow come from Europe and have a tight autumn breeding season. Rusa, sambar and chital come from South-East Asia and India and are far looser about it.



Typical timing, not fixed dates. Fallow and red can land a week or two either side depending on the area and season. Sambar and chital rows show where Australian sources put the busiest period, mostly from Victorian and Queensland herds; NSW herds may differ.

WHEN THE BEST HEADS ARE ABOUT

Mature males are easiest to find when the rut makes them careless. These are the windows worth taking leave for. If you want a head measured properly, the Australian Deer Association has run its Australian Antlered Trophy Register on the Douglas Score system since 1972.

SPECIES	RUT	BEST TROPHY WINDOW	WHAT A GOOD HEAD LOOKS LIKE	TIMING
FALLOW	Late Mar to early May, peaking early to mid Apr	First three weeks of April	Broad palms with points along the back edge. Around 60 cm of antler with a similar spread is a good buck.	FIRM
RED	3 to 4 weeks from late Mar or early Apr	Early to mid April	Plenty of points, matched on both sides. Douglas scoring rewards symmetry.	FIRM
RUSA	Peaks around Jul and Aug	July and August	Lyre-shaped, three points a side. In good country stags can pass 76 cm, but NSW heads rarely match the New Caledonian herd they came from.	FAIR
SAMBAR	Any month; activity often lifts Aug to Nov	Winter, late May to September	Any full six-point head is a trophy. 76 cm (30 in) is the one everyone chases.	LOOSE
CHITAL	Any month; most reported Jun and Jul	Any month you find a hard-antler stag	Long, slender three-point antlers. Beams in the high 20-inch range in good seasons (Queensland herds).	LOOSE

READING EACH RUT

What to listen for, what sign to look for, and how to hunt each species when it's rutting.

FALLOW DEER *Dama dama*

AUTUMN CLOCK • PEAK APRIL

WHERE IN NSW	The most widespread deer in the state. Open forest and woodland with a grassy understorey, and bush edges next to paddocks.
THE RUT	Builds through March, peaks early to mid April, tapers into early May. In any one area the hot part lasts two to three weeks.
LISTEN FOR	The croak: a deep, repeated grunt that sounds a lot like a pig. Bucks often croak hard through the night and go quiet not long after dawn.
SIGN	Scrapes pawed into sandy ground with hooves and antlers, marked with urine and gland scent, usually under a thrashed overhanging branch. Fallow don't wallow, so there's no mud in them.
TROPHY WINDOW	Peak rut, roughly the first three weeks of April.
CASTING	Bucks drop antlers around October and regrow in velvet over summer. Fawns arrive around December.

HOW TO HUNT THE FALLOW RUT

- ◆ Find the does first. Bucks set up where the does feed and bed, so plan around the doe routine.
- ◆ Be in position before legal light (30 minutes before sunrise) and listen before you move.
- ◆ Early, scattered croaks tend to be young bucks holding a doe or two. When the croaking goes constant, that's usually the big bucks moving in.
- ◆ Glass more than you walk. A freshly worked scrape line will get a visit.
- ◆ In the pre-rut, soft groans and light rattling along travel routes and the edges of scrape areas can pull a buck in. Electronic callers are legal on NSW public land.
- ◆ Wind first, every time. Loop around to come at a croaking buck from downwind, even if it costs you twenty minutes.
- ◆ Want meat? Take does or young deer. Rutting bucks go rank and lose condition fast.

Sources: ADA, Australia's Fallow Deer • ADA, rutting scrapes • Sporting Shooter, Solo fallow in the rut • Sporting Shooter, Our fallow rut • SSAA Qld • GMA Vic • Big Game Hunter • DPIRD, callers

WHERE IN NSW	Patchy but spreading: the tablelands, pockets of alpine country, and the south-east forests alongside fallow. Same habitat as fallow.
THE RUT	Short and loud. Three to four weeks, starting late March or early April. Stags are loudest in the middle two weeks.
LISTEN FOR	The roar, hardest at dawn and dusk in cool, still weather.
SIGN	Wallows. Stags roll in mud through the roar, which darkens them and spreads their scent. Thrashed saplings nearby.
TROPHY WINDOW	Early to mid April.
CASTING	Stags cast in September and October and have regrown by mid February. Calves are born in November and December.

HOW TO HUNT THE ROAR

- ◆ Locate by sound at first and last light, then close the distance on foot.
- ◆ Check every roar, even one you think you already know.
- ◆ Walk above or below known wallows to find stags without walking straight into them.
- ◆ Reds leave an area fast when pushed. Go slow, keep the wind in your face, and don't chase a stag that's moved off.
- ◆ A roaring stag is distracted; his hinds aren't. Pick them out before you move.
- ◆ Take enough gun. A .270 with a good hunting projectile is the usual floor for reds.

Sources: GMA Vic, When to hunt · Sporting Shooter, Red deer guide · Hunting Properties Australia · NZ DOC (same animal, NZ herds) · ADA trophy scorecard

RUSA DEER *Rusa timorensis*

WINTER CLOCK · PEAK JUL TO AUG

WHERE IN NSW	Thickest in the Illawarra, from Royal National Park down to Nowra, and on the coast around Coffs Harbour. Hunters also report them in the Watagan forests west of Lake Macquarie.
THE RUT	Winter, peaking around July and August.
LISTEN FOR	A loud, shrill bark from rutting stags.
SIGN	Wallows around the edges of their range, urine-stained mud smeared on rub trees and saplings, and beds tucked a couple of metres into lantana right next to feed. Stags leave big clumped droppings; hinds leave pellets.
TROPHY WINDOW	July and August. Stags cast in January or February, so autumn stags are still in velvet.
RUSA OR SAMBAR?	They cross-breed in the Illawarra. On a rusa the taller of the two top tines is usually the inner one; on a sambar it's the outer one.

HOW TO HUNT THE RUSA RUT

- ◆ Sit active wallows. Fresh mud on the rubs around one means a stag is using it.
- ◆ Work edges where thick scrub meets feed at first and last light. Rusa bed very close to where they eat.
- ◆ In lantana, move a step at a time and stand still far more than you walk.
- ◆ Coastal forests get plenty of other users, so weekdays are quieter than weekends.
- ◆ Rusa are regarded as one of the hardest Australian deer to hunt. Budget more days than you would for fallow.

Sources: Sporting Shooter, Species guide: rusa · ADA, Rusa deer · Wikipedia, Javan rusa · SSAA, Aussie deer · Lone Fig Environmental · Wild Range Life (hunter report)

WHERE IN NSW	Southern high country and the south-east forests down to the Victorian border. Tall wet eucalypt forest, farm edges, heath, woodland and rainforest.
THE RUT	No fixed rut. Hinds can come into season any month, so a stag in hard antler is always looking. Rut activity is often reported to lift from late winter into spring.
LISTEN FOR	Not much. Sambar stags don't roar or croak.
SIGN	Wallows, shallow rut scrapes with mud smeared on the scarred trunk above, and preaching trees where a stag has reared on his hind legs to rub scent as high as he can reach.
TROPHY WINDOW	Winter, roughly late May to September, when damp ground lets you get close.
GOOD HEAD	Any full six-point head. 76 cm(30 inches) is the dream.

Sources: ADA, rutting scrapes · GMA Vic · Mansfield Sambar Safaris · Magnum Hunting · Hunting Properties Australia · SSAA · DPIRD rules

HOW TO HUNT SAMBAR

- ◆ Hunt active wallows and rut scrapes through winter and spring. They pull in every age and sex.
- ◆ In summer the leaf litter is loud. Ambush deer heading back to bed at first light instead of stalking.
- ◆ Public land sambar get close to nocturnal under pressure. Be set up at legal light and stay out to the last legal minute.
- ◆ They're heavy and thick-skinned, so bullet construction matters as much as calibre. Victoria's legal floor for sambar is .270 with a 130 grain projectile.
- ◆ On NSW public land a dog may only locate, point or flush deer: one dog if you're alone, two for a group.

CHITAL DEER

Axis axis

NO CLOCK · MOSTLY PRIVATE LAND

WHERE IN NSW	Isolated but spreading. Mostly the southern Illawarra and the far western Southern Highlands.
THE RUT	No fixed rut. Stags in hard antler, velvet and freshly cast can all turn up in the same month. Australian sources put the most rutting around June and July, mainly from Queensland herds.
LISTEN FOR	A long, shrill shriek instead of a roar.
SIGN	Water. Chital drink every day, so waterholes and creek crossings are the ambush points.
ID CHECK	White spots in broken lines along the flanks all year. Fallow have blotchier spotting, and red fawns are spotty too.

Sources: Lone Fig Environmental · DPIRD, Feral deer · Sporting Shooter, chital · Inland Hunting Properties · Wild Deer & Hunting Adventures

HOW TO HUNT CHITAL

- ◆ Treat chital as a private land deer in NSW for now. Landholder groups in the southern Illawarra are actively trying to control them, which can open doors.
- ◆ Sit water early and late.
- ◆ Judge each stag on its own. With no set rut, a good hard-antler stag can walk out any month.

Hog deer are a Victorian species only, so they're not in this guide.

PUBLIC LAND BY REGION

Forest names are from DPIRD's Hunt NSW region list. Species and notes come from hunters' reports and regional surveys, so each card shows how solid the evidence is. Before you book, check the forest's species report in Hunt NSW and confirm it's still open.

HUNTER & CENTRAL COAST

~1 HR

RUSA

REPORTED

FORESTS Watagan, Olney, Heaton, Awaba, Corrabare, Pokolbin, Putty

Hunters report rusa through the Watagan forests, which puts a winter rut hunt close to Newcastle, Maitland and the Central Coast. Olney is a busy recreation forest with camping and mountain bike tracks, so weekdays are the go. DPIRD listed it as Category 1 with room for up to 24 hunters(2019). Ourimbah and Wyong State Forests sit in the same range but aren't on the DPIRD hunting list.

UPPER HUNTER & BARRINGTON

~2 TO 3 HRS

SPECIES UNCONFIRMED

CHECK FIRST

FORESTS Stewarts Brook, Barrington Tops, Tomalla, Nowendoc, Riamukka, Chichester

Deer are recorded in Barrington Tops National Park next door, but which species these State forests hold isn't confirmed. Barrington Tops State Forest sits around 1,500 m: cool temperate forest mixing open regrowth and dense rainforest, most main tracks 2WD and the steep ones 4WD. In Hunt NSW most of these sit under Mid North Coast, not Hunter. Worth a scouting trip.

NUNDLE & HANGING ROCK

~2.5 TO 3 HRS

FALLOW

RED UNCONFIRMED

REPORTED

FORESTS Nundle, Hanging Rock, Tuggolo

An April group hunt here came within 10 m of a mature fallow buck and took two hinds and several pigs(2009 report). The report doesn't say which species the hinds were. High country with its own weather: cold, wet and windy at night. Pine plantation broken by grassy meadows and creeks that run between the pine and the eucalypt. Damp pine needles kill footstep noise, but light is poor and binos struggle, so hunt the meadow edges. Listed under North West Slopes & Plains in Hunt NSW.

CENTRAL TABLELANDS

~4 HRS

FALLOW LIKELY

CHECK FIRST

FORESTS Vulcan, Gurnang, Jenolan, Hampton, Sunny Corner, Lidsdale

Hunters head into the big pine forests around Oberon for deer, but the published reports don't name the species forest by forest. Fallow are the likely one; confirm in the species reports. Snow is possible through winter. Same approach as Nundle: work the edges where pine meets native bush and clearings. One hunter's first season across Gurnang, Bago and Yerrilyong produced nothing, a good reminder that scouting beats a forest name on a list.

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS & ILLAWARRA

~3.5 TO 4 HRS

RUSA

FALLOW

CHITAL

CHECK FIRST

FORESTS Belanglo, Wingello, Meryla, Jellore, McDonald, Yerrilyong

Five of Australia's six wild deer species live across the Illawarra, Shoalhaven and Southern Highlands. Rusa run from Royal National Park to Nowra, fallow are spreading through the Highlands, and chital hold in the southern Illawarra and far west of the Highlands. Rusa and sambar hybridise here. Which forests hold which species is the part to confirm.

SOUTH WEST SLOPES

~7 HRS

FALLOW

STRONG

FORESTS Maragle South(ballot), Mannus(ballot), Maragle North, Bago, Green Hills, Micalong, Bondo, Wee Jasper

Maragle South and Mannus are so popular through the fallow rut that DPIRD runs them by ballot from 1 March to 3 May: sixteen 4-day periods, with 51 permits for Maragle South and 32 each for the Mannus Seymours and bows-only sections in 2026. A DPI notice(undated)said Maragle South fallow bucks can't be taken in January and February, so check your permission conditions. For other species in these forests, check the species reports.

SNOWY MOUNTAINS & FAR SOUTH COAST

~8 HRS

FALLOW

RED

SAMBAR

REPORTED

FORESTS Glenbog, Bondi, Coolangubra, Cathcart, Bombala, Nalbaugh, Tantawangalo, East Boyd, Yambulla

A local hunter rated Glenbog the most productive of the south-east forests: big fallow numbers, some reds, and sambar in numbers just to the south (2018). It books out at the start of the rut, gets very cold, and has open draws that allow longer shots. Around Eden the same hunter found a clearing holding at least 30 fallow and 7 reds. He also found Forestry closing Glenbog north of the highway on weekdays, so read your permission carefully.

NORTHERN TABLELANDS

~5 TO 6 HRS

RED

FALLOW

CHECK FIRST

FORESTS Boonoo, Ewingar, Girard, Gilgurry, Torrington, Sugarloaf

Reds range through the NSW tablelands and fallow are on private blocks around Glen Innes, but there's little published on these particular forests. Treat a first trip here as scouting.

Drive times are rough estimates from Singleton, where Hartland™ is based. Evidence levels: **STRONG** backed by DPIRD or several sources.

REPORTED one or two hunters' reports, some of them years old. **CHECK FIRST** species known in the region, not confirmed for these forests. Two third-party maps show DPIRD species reports per forest: nsw-hunting.info and NSW Hunt Planner. Check how current they are before relying on them.

THE RULES THAT MATTER IN THE RUT

From DPIRD's written permission conditions (current from 22 September 2025) and the hunting regulations, as they stood in late September 2026. They change, so re-read your permission before every hunt.

LICENCE AND PERMISSION

R-Licence plus written permission from Hunt NSW for the forest and dates. Carry both; a digital copy is fine.

BLAZE ORANGE

One blaze orange item on your upper body, visible from all sides, whenever you're hunting or carrying hunting gear. Hat, beanie, shirt, jumper, jacket, vest or buff.

FOREST CATEGORIES

Category 1 books 7 days a week, Category 2 weekends only (plus adjoining public holidays), Category 3 weekdays only. Forestry can change a category without notice.

NO TREE STANDS OR SIGHTING IN

Both are banned on public land. Sight in on private land or at a club range before you go.

DRONES

Allowed to help you hunt under CASA rules. Stay 200 m from harvesting operations and don't harass other forest users.

HARVEST RETURN

Lodge one within 30 days of every public land hunt. It's also how the species reports get built.

DAYLIGHT ONLY FOR DEER

Deer can't be hunted at night on public land. A day permission runs from 30 minutes before sunrise to 30 minutes after sunset.

A GPS EACH

Every hunter carries their own GPS device (a phone counts) with the current DPIRD map for that forest loaded. Groups can't share one.

BALLOT FORESTS

Maragle South and both Mannus sections are ballot only from 1 March to 3 May. You nominate up to two 4-day periods in Hunt NSW.

NO HUNTING FROM VEHICLES

A motor vehicle can't be used to hunt or help hunt. Firearms travel unloaded and out of sight, ammo locked away separately.

FIRE

No hunting on a Total Fire Ban day for that region, or where a hazard reduction burn is on. Check RFS and Forestry closures first.

NON-HUNTING MATES

They can come along and help carry a carcass out, but can't carry any hunting gear or help with the hunt.

NO SEASONS

All deer species can be hunted all year in NSW, on public and private land.

ONE CLEAR DAY

The first booking of a forest for a given day needs a full day's gap: book Monday, hunt Wednesday. If someone already holds that forest that day, you can start straight away.

CALLERS YES, BAIT NO

Electronic callers are legal on public land. Bait, grain, fruit, mineral blocks, carcasses and other attractants are not.

DOGS ON DEER

Locate, point or flush only. One dog solo, two for a group. Tagged collar, microchip, and a lead or a switched-on tracking collar.

KEEP CLEAR

Stay out of exclusion zones on your map, and at least 100 m from any occupied house, building or fire tower.

PRIVATE LAND

No game licence is needed for deer on private land in NSW. You need the landholder's permission and your firearms licence.

Calibre: the DPIRD hunting pages don't set a legal calibre minimum for deer. Victoria's legal minimums make a sensible floor: .270 and 130 grain for sambar, rusa and red; .243 and 80 grain for fallow, chital and hog deer. The NSW Game Hunting Licence Code of Practice still requires gear that can be expected to kill humanely.

THE YEAR, PLANNED OUT

What the deer are doing each month and what to get done on your days off.

JAN SCOUT	Fallow and red antlers finishing in velvet. Use days off to find doe and hind mobs, water and feed. Check your R-Licence expiry date. If you're booked into Maragle South, check whether the January and February buck restriction still applies.
FEB PREPARE	Velvet comes off and the first rubs show up. Sight in on private land or at the club range. Book March and April hunts early and allow for the one clear day rule. Ballot results should be out by now.
MAR PRE-RUT	Scrapes and rut trees appear, and young fallow bucks start croaking late in the month. The Maragle South and Mannus ballot period starts 1 March. If you can get midweek days off, Category 3 (weekday only) forests see less traffic.
APR PEAK RUT	The big one. Peak fallow rut and the red roar. Put your leave here, ideally the first three weeks. Be on the scrape line before first light and listen before you move.
MAY POST-RUT	Bucks are worn out and tines get broken, but antlers stay hard. The ballot period ends 3 May and Maragle South and Mannus go back to normal bookings.
JUN WINTER	Sambar on the wallows down south. Rusa stags harden up for their rut. Fallow and red bucks recover condition after the rut.
JUL RUSA RUT	Rusa rut kicks off. The Hunter and Central Coast forests are the close option for anyone in the Hunter; check their species reports first. Prime sambar stalking weather. Fallow and red bucks start forming bachelor mobs.
AUG RUSA PEAK	Peak rusa rut. Sambar rut sign starts to lift. Fallow and red bucks in bachelor mobs.
SEP SCOUT	Quiet for trophies. Red stags start casting this month and fallow bucks next. Scout new country and lock in leave for next April.
OCT CASTING	Fallow and red drop their antlers. From about now through February they're in their best eating condition. Fire season starts: no hunting on a Total Fire Ban day in that region.
NOV BALLOT	Enter the Maragle South and Mannus ballot as soon as registrations open (they opened in November in both 2024 and 2025). Red calves start arriving, bucks are in velvet.
DEC LOCK IN	Fallow fawns born, bucks in velvet. The ballot draw has landed anywhere from December to early February. Lock in April leave now.

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WHAT ISN'T CONFIRMED YET

Some of this guide is solid and some of it isn't. This is general information to help you plan, not legal advice.

- Which species each individual forest holds right now. Pull the current species report in Hunt NSW before you book.
- Sambar and chital timing for NSW herds. Most published data comes from Victoria or Queensland.
- Dates for the 2027 ballot. Registrations opened in November in 2024 and 2025; 2027 dates weren't out when this edition was published.
- The Maragle South January and February buck restriction comes from an undated DPI notice. Check your permission conditions.
- A NSW legal calibre minimum for deer. The DPIRD pages don't set one; the Victorian figures are a benchmark, not NSW law.
- Drive times are rough.
- Some hunter reports are old (Nundle 2009, Glenbog 2018), so numbers on the ground may have changed. Red deer in the Nundle forests are unconfirmed.

FROM HARTLAND™

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Hartland™ Hunting & Outdoors is a small, online-only hunting and outdoors brand from Singleton, NSW. We're building Range™, a camouflage pattern designed for Australian eucalypt country. It's in field testing now.

This guide is free. Print it, share it, take it hunting. If it helped, join the Hartland™ list for new field guides, Range™ updates and launch news.

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