



**SAMBAR**  
**AUSTRALIA, N.T., Darwin**  
**MAJ 2008**  
**MECHISLAV KLIMOVICH**



**BRONZE AWARD**  
**133 7/8**



*Sambar* (G), *Cervus sambar* (F). "Sambar" (sometimes spelled sambur or sambhur) is the Hindustani name for this animal. Confusingly, this animal is sometimes called rusa (*please see rusa deer text*).

**DESCRIPTION** (*male*) Shoulder height about 48 inches (122 cm). Weight about 400 pounds (181 kg), although some may be considerably larger. Females are smaller.

A large, strongly built deer. The color varies with the individual animal from brown to grayish-brown, with older stags sometimes darker gray to almost black. The underparts, chin and rump are somewhat lighter. Females are lighter in color than males. The coat is coarse but not thick, and males have a small neck mane. The tail is short and bushy. The ears are large and rounded, and are shaded white on the inside. Both sexes have large preorbital glands, which apparently they are able to evert at will, causing them to appear to be nearly as large as the eyes. (In China, sambar are called "four-eyed deer.") The antlers are sturdy and well-formed, with the coronets heavily pearly. Typical antlers have three points to a side (main beam plus two tines). A long brow tine sprouts close to the burr and grows forward and upward. An inner top tine grows from the inside of the main beam to form the terminal fork. The main beam is considered to be the outer top point. The terminal fork is more-or-less forward-facing and has no fixed pattern--sometimes the outer top is longer, sometimes the inner, and sometimes they are even. An occasional head will have additional tines; such tines are always non-typical in sambar.

The longest antlers recorded from New Zealand were taken near Foxton (North Island) prior to 1924 and measured just under 39-3/4 inches (100.9 cm).

**BEHAVIOR** Sambar live in small family groups of eight or fewer (usually 3-5), mainly females and young. Older stags are solitary except when rutting, at which time they establish small territories and are joined by females for various periods of time. There appears to be no fixed breeding season in Australia, thus stags with hard antlers may be encountered at any time of year and calves may be born in any month. Sambar on the North Island of New Zealand rut during April and May, and calves are born eight months later. Contrary to the assumptions of early naturalists, stags do not retain their antlers for two or more years, but shed them annually.

Normally diurnal, feeding morning and evening, but becoming nocturnal when hunted hard. Sambar are both grazers and browsers. Their diet includes grasses, shrubs and the bark of trees, and they drink water regularly. Fond of wallowing in mud along streambeds, and the same wallows may be used year after year. Hearing, sense of smell and eyesight are very good. Shy, elusive and intelligent, sambar are difficult to approach. Stags are pugnacious, fighting each other outside the rut as well as during it. Can be dangerous to humans. Alarm call is a

short, sharp, deep blast that has a melodious quality (termed "belling" in India).

**HABITAT** Sambar in Australia and New Zealand frequent thick scrub and swampy areas with grass nearby.

**DISTRIBUTION** **Australia:** Wild sambar occur mainly in Victoria and adjacent parts of southeastern New South Wales, but are also found on the Cobourg Peninsula in the Northern Territory. May have been introduced in Tasmania during the early 1900s (this is disputed), but in any case they are not found there today. Enclosed sambar are found on some private estates. **New Zealand:** Wild sambar are found only on the North Island, where they are in two well-separated herds. The Manawatu herd occurs along the southwestern coast from Levin to Harakeke (just south of Wanganui), and inland along the Turakina and Whangape valleys. The Bay of Plenty herd is found mainly from southeast of Rotorua to Whakatane on the coast, but there are other small populations as well. Enclosed sambar are found on some private estates.

**TAXONOMIC NOTES** The first sambar to reach the South Pacific region arrived in Australia in 1861 from Galle, Sri Lanka. Subsequent introductions are believed to have come from India. Some Philippine sambar (*Cervus mariannus*, a different species) from Basilan Island in the Philippines were kept in Royal Park, Victoria, from 1863 to 1868. They were the blackish highland variety of the subspecies *nigricans*, and it is not known if they were ever released to the wild. The sambar introduced in New Zealand (1875) were from Sri Lanka.

**REMARKS** Wild, free-ranging sambar are generally regarded as the most difficult and prestigious trophy animal of the South Pacific region.

As far as we know, sambar and rusa deer do not interbreed in the wild. They do not normally come into contact, as they have different ecological requirements and their social behavior is different. Moreover, there are no wild populations that show hybrid characteristics. However, they do interbreed under farm conditions and their offspring are fertile. Hybrids between sambar stags and rusa hinds (sometimes called Samson deer) have been bred for commercial meat and antler production on Australian deer farms for a number of years.

Hunters should be aware that hybrid stags with good antlers are sometimes sold to hunting ranches in Australia and New Zealand, and that such barnyard hybrids are not accepted in the Record Book.

